“How Do I Comfort Them on Zoom?” Academic Advisors of Exploratory Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic advisors who supported college students without an academic major. These students are often classified as undecided or undeclared. However, some colleges and universities have adopted the term "exploring" to refer to this diverse group of students and have established Exploratory Studies units to assist them. In these specialized units, academic advisors engage with students in one-on-one sessions to assess their skills, interests, and values, helping them determine which major best fits their goals. Additionally, the academic advisors of exploratory students (AAES) facilitate introductory or survey classes for these students. Consequently, the number of academic touchpoints that advisors have with their advisees often exceeds those of advisors in academic units such as business, computer science, and education. Through virtual interviews, AAES participants from across the country described how they continued to support their advisees while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. They initially had reservations about their ability to effectively advise and teach remotely; nevertheless, they committed to learning new technologies, utilizing video conferencing platforms, and developing a more holistic advising approach to continue helping students. Some advisors questioned why their institutions were not adequately informed and prepared for the pandemic; however, most believed their institutions managed the situation as well as possible. According to the AAES, due to changes brought about by the pandemic, their advising approaches were reassessed and strengthened, student services were expanded, and the advisors achieved a more balanced work-life.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Look at God! Won't He do it?

Namaste

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved mother, Nancy Louise. I received the college education that she was denied. It is also dedicated to my great-grandfather, Charles Barnes, a self-taught man who revealed to me the beauty and power of learning.

Chapter I

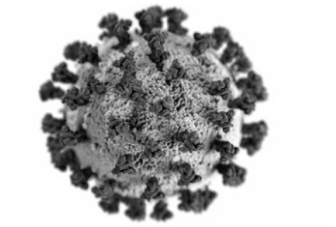
INTRODUCTION

In mid-December 2019, a cluster of patients in Wuhan, a city in China's Hubei Province, experienced severe shortness of breath and high fever that did not respond to standard treatment. On December 31, public health officials in China notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of "pneumonia with unknown etiology," or pneumonia of unknown cause (CDC, 2024). One week later, Chinese officials identified the causative agent of the unknown pneumonia as a novel coronavirus. On January 11, 2020, the first death attributed to the novel coronavirus was reported in China (CDC, 2024).

Scientists coined the term "coronavirus" in the 1960s to describe viruses with crown-like spike structures resembling the sun's corona. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Image of a Coronavirus



Note: From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (2024). *CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline*.

The virus spreads when droplets and particles are released from an infected person's mouth and nose as they talk, laugh, sing, cough, or sneeze. Larger droplets may fall to the ground in seconds, but tiny particles can linger in the air and accumulate,

especially indoors. This new acute respiratory coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, caused worldwide concern due to its severe impact on the human respiratory system. The virus also proliferates rapidly as asymptomatic individuals unknowingly spread it, while others transmit it 48 hours before becoming symptomatic (Johns Hopkins Medicine, n.d.).

COVID-19 Timeline

By January 19, 2020, there were 282 laboratory-confirmed coronavirus cases in China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. On January 20, the first confirmed case in the United States was reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) when a patient in Washington state who had traveled to China became ill. At the end of January, the total number of cases in the U.S. reached seven when the CDC confirmed an instance of person-to-person spread of the virus (CDC, 2024).

On February 11th, the WHO officially named the coronavirus COVID-19, an acronym for coronavirus disease, and 19 for the year of the outbreak. By mid-February, the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 had reached one thousand (CDC, 2024). In a telebriefing on February 25th, Dr. Nancy Messonnier, the CDC's Incident Manager for the COVID-19 team, cautioned listeners about the societal effects of the virus. She stated that mitigation efforts to contain the coronavirus would include canceling public events, shutting down workplaces, and closing schools. Dr. Messonnier's warning was clear: the "disruption to everyday life may be severe" (CDC, 2024, para. 17). On March 3, 2020, the CDC reported coronavirus cases in Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wisconsin, with 21 travel-related, 11 spread person-to-person, and 27 infections of unknown origin detected (CDC, 2024).

Wednesday, March 11, 2020, has been referred to as "The day everything changed" (Wamsley, 2021, para. 1). On that day, with 4,291 deaths and 118,000 confirmed cases across 114 countries, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the highest level of health emergency. The following day, grocery shoppers encountered long lines and empty shelves, travelers scrambled to adjust their plans, and organizers canceled events. Government authorities issued shelter-in-place orders after all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and four U. S. territories confirmed cases of COVID-19 (CDC, 2024). The words of Dr. Messonnier rang true: the disruption had begun.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The rapid rise of the coronavirus kept communities and citizens in turmoil. Along with government-initiated shelter-in-place orders, the contagious virus forced businesses to reduce services, implement social distancing measures, and designate essential workers (Hooper et al., 2020; Tasso et al., 2021). The suddenness, contagion, and unpredictability of COVID-19 caused tremendous strife, affecting all sectors of society, including higher education.

Effects on Higher Education

College campuses are communities where students live, learn, work, and connect. When the pandemic struck during the 2019-2020 school year, nearly 20 million students were enrolled in postsecondary institutions, representing 40% of the U.S. population aged 18 to 24 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). However, the spread of the COVID-19 virus disrupted college life on multiple levels. In response to the virus, at least 85% of colleges across all 50 states canceled in-person classes and attempted to transition to online courses for the remainder of the Spring 2020 term (New York Times, 2020).

Academic advising and other on-campus operations also shifted to a virtual format as faculty and staff were asked to work remotely to mitigate the spread of the virus (Turk et al., 2020). Many students, some of whom were on spring break, were abruptly displaced from their college residences and could only return to collect their personal belongings. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) canceled its three-week basketball tournament, March Madness, just as it was about to begin. Held at various sites across the United States, men's and women's teams from 68 colleges compete for a national championship. The men's tournament, a staple since 1939, was canceled for the first time since its inception (NCAA, 2020).

The pandemic affected summer orientation, a crucial time for incoming students to receive academic advice, familiarize themselves with the campus, and register for fall classes (ACHA, 2020). As the pandemic continued into the 2020-2021 academic year, colleges and universities resumed some in-person classes and reopened administrative offices while enforcing mask and social distancing guidelines (Aucejo et al., 2020; Hooper et al., 2020). However, higher education institutions had to address the virus's effects over several semesters, including implementing mask mandates, on-campus housing restrictions, testing students and staff for the virus, and, once available in 2021, requiring vaccinations (Hodge et al., 2023). As higher education sought to fully reopen, the Delta and Omicron variants impacted campus operations in 2021 and 2022.

The Challenges

The battle against the spread of COVID-19, which began in the spring of 2020, had a significant impact on the delivery of academic instruction, social activities, and student services on college campuses for several semesters (New York Times, 2021). In-person classes, campus activities, and support services gradually resumed with mask-

wearing, socially distanced interactions, and vaccination requirements in place (Education Strategy Group, 2022). However, other services did not fully resume as new obstacles arose, including budget constraints and staff shortages. The Education Strategy Group (2022) implied that a class of college students was at risk of becoming a "Lost COVID Cohort." Colleges sell their experience, and from campus closures to online instruction, the unprecedented effects of the pandemic challenged postsecondary institutions. This study focuses on the academic advising of a specific group of college students who rely on advisement to progress toward graduation: those without an academic major.

College Students Without an Academic Major

An academic major serves as an identification mark in college. Whether to group students at orientation or within their residence halls, sharing a major can foster a sense of student bonding (University of Bridgeport, 2023). Sometimes, however, a college student has not chosen a major field of study because they are "unwilling, unable, or unready to make educational and/or vocational decisions" (Gordon, 2007a, p. x).

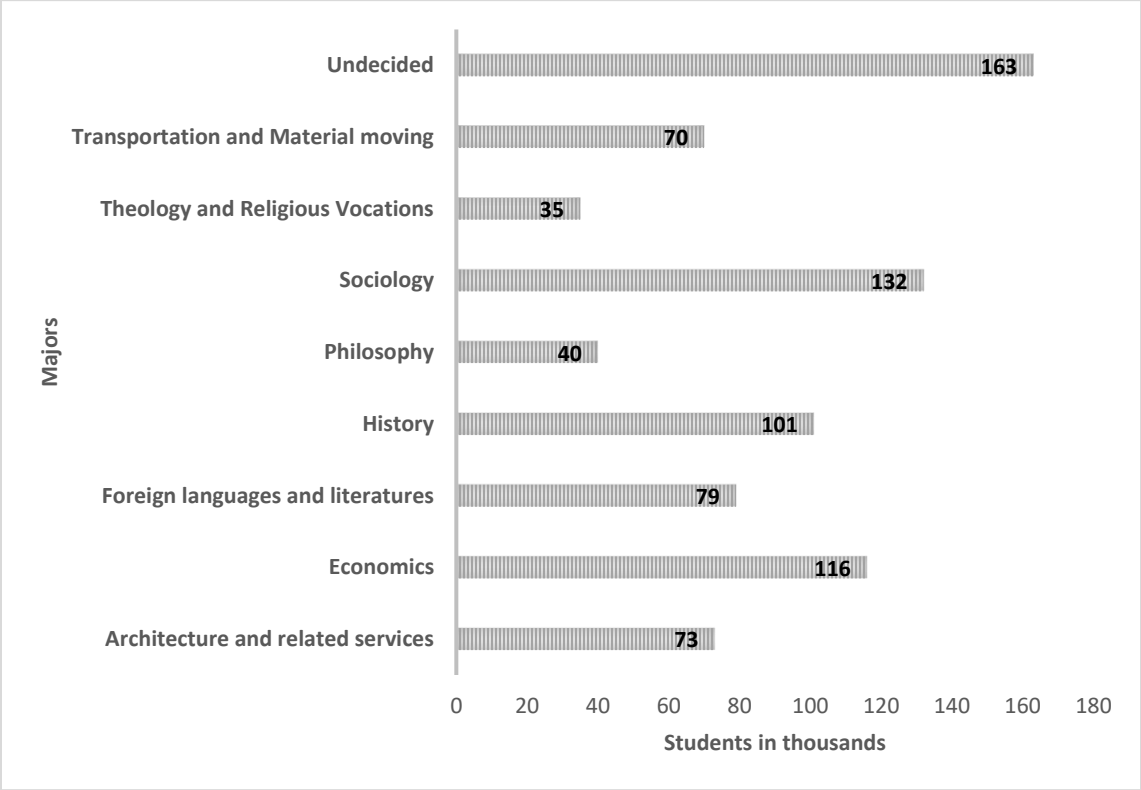
Similarities and Differences

College students without a declared major constitute a diverse and complex group. They come from various income levels, geographic regions, and ethnic backgrounds. They may be home-schooled, honor students, student-athletes, physically disabled, or the first in their family to attend college (Gordon & Steele, 2015). They may have switched majors, transferred from another institution, or remain undecided while trying to enroll in a program for which they have not yet met the requirements. They form a significant population regardless of their background, status, or reasons. The

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported 163,000 students as undecided in the 2019-20 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). The number of undecided students exceeds those majoring in economics, history, sociology, or theology, and is twice that of those majoring in architecture, foreign languages, philosophy, or transportation. Figure 2 is a graphical illustration of the data.

Figure 2

Postsecondary Education Enrollment, Selected Majors: Academic Year 2019-20



Why They Have Not Chosen a Major

The reasons students have not decided on a major are varied. Some are curious about more than one major and want to take the time to decide (Dika et al., 2015; Gordon & Steele, 2015). Many students report feeling overwhelmed by the numerous academic

majors available in college (Gordon et al., 2008; Gordon & Steele, 2015). Some know little about what is involved in different careers or how their strengths relate to occupations. Others may have changed majors and wish to explore their options before choosing their next one (Ellis, 2014; Gordon et al., 2008; Gordon & Steele, 2015).

Students have reported mixed feelings about their undecidedness and have expressed being scared, anxious, or apologetic about being open, flexible, and curious (Gordon & Steele, 2015). College students who are undecided about a major field of study often face the stigma of being unfocused, which is linked to the idea that they will prolong their graduation (Astin, 2012; Brown & Rector, 2008; Holland & Nichols, 1964; Lewellen, 1993). Consequently, they risk being ostracized and marginalized.

Exploratory – Defined and Applied

Applying a uniform term to college students without a major has been challenging. Terms such as pre-major, undecided, undeclared, and undetermined have been used interchangeably (Gordon, 2007a; Gordon & Steele, 2015; Lewallen, 1993). However, several higher education institutions have adopted the term exploratory for students without a declared major.

Merriam-Webster's Learners Dictionary defines exploratory as “done to find something or learn more about something” (n.d., para. 3). The term exploratory captures the essence of students who want to investigate various subjects in a college environment or whose academic path is unclear (Berger, 2003; Carduner et al., 2011). Exploratory describes a student unsure about their career aspirations, vacillating between two majors or ten, and students with a career goal but who have not chosen a program (Kent State University, n.d.; University of Nevada-Reno, 2025). The term is also used for students enrolled but did not gain admittance to their initial academic major choice (University of

Cincinnati, 2021) and for students who show potential for college-level work but do not meet university admissions requirements (Southern Illinois University, 2023). Exploratory reflects the many shades of decision-making that college students go through to determine a major. From this point forward in this dissertation, exploratory will be used to describe students without a major.

Exploratory Studies Programs

Exploratory describes programs and advisors in addition to students. Colleges and universities offer exploratory students targeted advising, career assessments, workshops, and for-credit courses. Learning communities, internships, and job shadowing opportunities are also available, exposing students to multiple fields of study and career possibilities.

Program Similarities. A common thread in exploratory programs is the way academic advisors engage with students. Advisors maintain multiple touchpoints with exploratory students through one-on-one meetings and classes on careers, policies, and educational resources that they facilitate. A consistent connection with an advisor assists students in selecting a career path and course of study in a guided and intentional manner (Gordon & Steele, 2015). Personal and career assessment tools enable exploratory students to assess their values, strengths, and interests critically. PathwayU is a free career assessment tool that helps students align their interests, values, and personality with various career options (University of Memphis, 2023). Another tool, the Strong Interest Inventory (SII) test, uses themes to evaluate which jobs, activities, people, and academic subjects interest the student the most (Career Assessment Site, 2025). The CliftonStrengths for Students assessment comprises 34 research-validated talent themes,

designed to help students build confidence in themselves and their ability to impact the world positively (Citrus College, 2025).

Program Differences. One difference in exploratory programs is the time a student can explore before they must declare a major. Although services for exploratory students often focus on their first year, students can continue to receive support through their second year and beyond (Kent State University, n.d.; Slippery Rock University, n.d.). Transfer students may also be exploratory at some institutions (Ohio State University, n.d.; Oregon State University, 2025). Another difference is whether the exploration is open to multiple paths or if the student must commit to one of the options referred to as a Track, Focus, or Meta-Major, such as Humanities or Business (Georgia Southern University, 2025; Georgia State University, 2025). At Drexel University, students can be exploratory or undeclared. Exploratory students take classes across multiple colleges and divisions; undeclared students focus their studies within a single college or division (Drexel, 2023).

Program Examples

In 2023, CollegeMagazine.com published a list of the 10 Best Colleges for Undecided Majors. The article begins with a question and a statement that resonates with many exploratory students: “How do universities expect us to know at age 20 what we want to do for the next 40 years? We can't even decide what to eat for dinner tonight” (Miano, 2023, para. 1). The list of colleges for undecided students includes Brown University, which has a single core requirement (Brown University, n.d.); Grinnell College, allowing students to design a major with multiple concentrations or focus on a niche (Grinnell College, 2021); and Swarthmore College, where students must explore

for two years (Swarthmore College, n.d.). Without ranking or classifying, the following seven colleges and universities illustrate institutions with exploratory programs. These examples cover institutions with 1,700 to over 37,000 students across six US regions and were chosen to highlight the diversity of programs offered by institutions of varying sizes and geographic locations.

The University of Cincinnati (UC) established the Center for Exploratory Studies (CES) in 2003 to promote student retention. With 1,500 students, CES has more enrollees than any other major at the institution (University of Cincinnati, 2021). An exploratory advisor guides students who wish to explore any of the 125 majors offered, students who have decided on a major but have not yet met the admission requirements, or students who initially declared a major but switched to Exploratory Studies in search of a new one (University of Cincinnati, 2021). UC also offers a Learning Community (LC) for exploring students. LCs enable students with common interests to take courses together, engage in learning outside the classroom, facilitate academic and social transitions, and foster a sense of community (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Swanson et al., 2021).

Purdue University has multiple campuses throughout the state of Indiana. In its Exploratory Studies division, the staff promotes a holistic approach. They encourage students to learn more about themselves and the world as they explore the more than 200 majors offered by the school (Purdue University, n.d.). Its first-year seminar courses are small and interactive, featuring intriguing topics and providing opportunities for students to connect with others with similar interests. Purdue was a trailblazer in 1996 with a pilot program for undecided first-year students.

Students exploring Boise State University (BSU) in Idaho are encouraged to find a major that best suits their interests and goals. At BSU, the “Who, What, and How of the Major Exploration Process” provides resources for students to research careers, access job market information, and discover how careers align with their interests (Boise State University, 2025).

At Harding University, a Church of Christ institution in the Ozark foothills of Arkansas, students can explore the university's more than 100 areas of study while completing 60 general education hours. In the Exploration of Career, Calling, and Vocation class, students are guided through career exploration exercises, receive feedback from vocational and interest assessments, and visit with faculty in prospective career fields. The process is intended to equip students to make informed decisions. Harding promotes the idea that students who dedicate time to exploring their options are more likely to choose the right major the first time and avoid delays in graduation (Harding University, n.d.).

North Carolina State University (NC State) offers a comprehensive Exploratory Studies program, established in 1995 as a First-Year College. NC State is committed to ensuring that students who are exploring their options have the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to transition successfully to a major (NC State University, 2025). Typically, exploring students make up 10-15% of each first-year class. Academic advisors provide one-on-one assistance to these 1,100 students and lead university studies courses that cover campus policies, resources, and learning from diverse perspectives. Additionally, NC State features an Exploratory Studies Village, where first-year exploratory students receive a year of guided inquiry and engage in one-on-one sessions

with their academic advisor to help them navigate career planning and decision-making (NC State University, 2025).

Administrators at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU) found that 43% of their students planned to explore majors, and 40% of those with a declared major changed their major after arriving on campus. In response, CU created a Program in Exploratory Studies (PES) to enhance graduation rates and support students engaged in academic and career exploration. (University of Colorado Boulder, n.d.). “This is a great opportunity for students to have the room to explore and find their interests before settling on a major.” (University of Colorado Boulder, n.d., para. 2).

At Oregon State University, advisors in the University Exploratory Studies Program (UESP) guide students through intentional exploration processes. They also offer specialized support for Oregon State’s E-campus students who “are serious about completing their degree online but are unsure which major they want to pursue.” (Oregon State University, 2025). The UESP advisors promote frequent contact, clarify academic policies and regulations, and provide assessments of interests, skills, and values.

Higher education institutions create policies and programs supporting student exploration as students face the challenges of transitioning to college and making academic choices that will shape their experiences and the rest of their lives (Workman, 2013). The reasons institutions provide support, the labeling of students, the resources they offer, and the duration of their support all vary. However, one common denominator is the involvement of academic advisors.

Academic Advising

Like the universities of Cambridge and Oxford in England, students and faculty often shared residences in early colleges, which allowed faculty to maintain a close

disciplinary relationship with their students (Rudolph, 1990). Over time, the faculty became less involved in disciplining students and treated them more as free thinkers responsible for their own developmental choices. Soon, institutions began creating separate areas for guidance and counseling (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997).

The need for academic guidance increased in the late 19th century with the establishment of land-grant colleges following the passage of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. These acts partnered the U.S. federal government with states to fund public colleges and expand access to higher education for previously excluded individuals (Oregon State University, 2025, Advising Vision, Mission, Goals, and Commitments section). Academic advising continued to grow throughout the 20th century as colleges began administering occupational assessments inspired by the U.S. Army's practice of placing World War I recruits in positions based on their skills and intelligence (Gallagher & Demos, 1983). In 1944, the G.I. Bill was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, providing financial assistance to military veterans for college attendance and other educational purposes. In the 1960s and 1970s, the influx of baby boomers on college campuses led to a significant increase in demand for advising and counseling services. Since then, academic advising has become a mainstay in college student services (Gordon, 2007a; Gordon & Steele, 2015).

Advising Purposes

The overarching purpose of academic advising is to assist students' educational journey (Aljets, 2018; Gordon & Steele, 2015). Academic advising occurs in situations where “an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter. The nature of this direction might be to inform,

suggest, counsel, discipline, coach, mentor, or even teach" (Kuhn & Padak, 2008, p. 3). Researchers agree that academic advisement in higher education is essential (Gordon & Steele, 2015; Hovland et al., 1997; Morgan, 2020).

Advising Styles

Advisors employ various communication styles to guide students. Table 1 presents six styles commonly employed by academic advisors.

Table 1

Advising Styles

Style	Description
Appreciative Advising	Open-ended, reflective questions help to understand a student's interests, values, and skills and draw connections to potential majors.
Developmental Advising	Emphasizes partnership. Students regularly consult with their academic advisor, who provides insights and suggestions.
Narrative Advising	
Student to advisor	Students tell their stories, and the advisor listens. If a story lacks probability or fidelity, the advisor questions it for integrity.
Advisor to student	The advisor uses anecdotes, including those from their own life, to illustrate a point, often for the sake of connectedness and bonding.
Prescriptive Advising	Emphasizes the expertise of the academic advisor. The advisor provides the solution to a student's situation.
Proactive Advising	Emphasize actions by the academic advisor. e.g., Inform students about the services if they are unsure where to go or whom to contact.
Socratic Advising	Ask questions to learn about the students, what motivates them, and the basis for their decisions.

Note: Adapted from NACADA. (2019). The NACADA Resource Warehouse.

Successful advisors employ situational advising and varied styles to meet the needs of their advisees. They learn to assess which style to apply and transition between styles as needed, depending on the student and the circumstances. An overarching approach, referred to as holistic advising, focuses on the complexities of the whole student and is often used with exploratory students. (Higgins et al., 2021).

Relational Aspects

When students enter college, they often leave one culture behind to embrace another. Academic advisors can foster connections and ease uncertainty (Glaessgen et al., 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Advisors play a crucial role in helping students find a sense of belonging that enhances retention (Soden, 2017; Tinto, 2016). As higher education grapples with swift technological advancements, reduced funding, and an increasingly global society, the emphasis on retention, persistence, and the relational aspect of academic advisors has gained traction (Grites et al., 2016; Higgins et al., 2021).

Exploratory Advisors

Of the approximately 3 million students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities each year, estimates suggest that between 20% and 45% do so without declaring a major field of study (Buford & Nestor, 2019; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Research on these students illustrates their reliance on academic advisement and related support services to guide their exploration of career interests and major fields of study (Aljets, 2018; Gordon et al., 2008; Gordon & Steele, 2015). Higher education institutions have developed specific support programs for these students, expecting that this assistance will lead to increased retention and graduation rates (Aljets, 2018; Gordon et al., 2008; Gordon & Steele, 2015).

As instruction moved online, academic advising did, too. Adaptations were necessary for relational functions, such as academic advising of exploratory students, to transition from the traditional, face-to-face model to remote advising (Houdyshell et al., 2022). Synchronous video communication technology, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, became an important tool for communicating with students, faculty, and staff during the pandemic, as well as the need for continuation of asynchronous communications, e.g., email and Facebook (Cicco, 2021; Wang & Houdyshell, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, quickly became disruptive on college campuses. Higher education administrators, often without prior experience in this area, made critical and urgent decisions to keep their students, faculty, and staff safe from the rapid spread of the virus (Hooper et al., 2020; Tasso et al., 2021). Students at many institutions saw their campus residences abruptly closed, and their in-person classes were moved online (Abumalloh et al., 2021). Researchers agreed that the virus caused significant disruption in higher education institutions for several semesters, resulting in budget constraints, staff shortages, reduced enrollment, and retention issues (Education Strategy Group, 2022; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022).

However, during the pandemic, academic advising for exploratory students was affected, as their classes, which informed students of career opportunities and majors, had to be altered, and career learning opportunities were canceled. Most in-person summer orientations were modified to be virtual, and other person-to-person resources became remote, had limited access, or were unavailable (ACHA, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). College students reported an increased need for academic advising services during the

pandemic (Blankstein et al., 2020; Survase & Johnson, 2023). Higher student demand, plus new and expanded contact methods, increased the frequency of student-advisor interactions. Additionally, there were budget cuts, hiring freezes, and layoffs. There were also ambiguities around organizational policies and procedures that frequently changed (Survase & Johnson, 2023).

Postsecondary institutions have various advising structures, but all academic advisors are responsible for educating students and creating opportunities to address their educational journey (Gordon & Steele, 2015). However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic advisors were forced to modify their delivery and support of students. Academic advisors faced numerous challenges, including increased demand for advising services, reduced organizational resources, shifts in institutional policies, and altered work environments resulting from the pandemic (Survase & Johnson, 2023).

Administrators have data indicating that advisors play a central role in student success, as studies suggest that students who participate in academic advising experience higher retention and persistence rates to graduation (Darling, 2015; Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Kuhn & Padak, 2008; Ross et al., 2012). Research studies have been conducted on academic advisors and the impact of the pandemic. However, a gap remains regarding the experiences of academic advisors of exploratory students (AAES) navigating the pandemic while supporting their students. Recent literature describes how the COVID-19 pandemic affected categories of college students (Baloran, 2020; Boyraz & Legros, 2020; Tasso et al., 2021), but no research was found on the impact on exploratory students during that time.

Conceptual Framework

All research involves systematic investigation. A conceptual framework is a system of concepts, assumptions, and relationships that helps researchers understand and guide their research. The conceptual framework, in essence, serves as a research map to guide the process and interpret findings (Maxwell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

A conceptual framework guides data collection and analysis by providing a foundational structure through which the researcher interprets the phenomenon being studied. It often draws on existing theories and literature to understand the complexities of a topic within a specific context; this helps clarify the research problem, refine research questions, and ultimately presents a coherent understanding of the findings. Saldaña (2011) described three components needed in a conceptual framework to steer the study: the methodological premise, the epistemological premise, and the theoretical premise. Those three components are described in detail to illustrate how they will be applied to this study.

Methodological Premise

A methodical design and an approach are needed as the foundation of a research study. The design and approach should align with the research question and worldview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research focuses on understanding social and human behavior by gaining insights into and understanding the perspectives of those being studied (Merriam, 2008; Yin, 2015). Qualitative research is an intensive analysis of a phenomenon with a rich, thick description of the results (Merriam, 2008). Given the need for thick, rich descriptive information in this study, a qualitative design was chosen.

Qualitative Design

Qualitative research seeks to gain insight into events, situations, or phenomena, aiming to understand people's interpretations of the world and their experiences as these interpretations of reality evolve over time (Creswell et al., 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011; Seidman, 2013). Qualitative approaches employ similar data generation processes, including interviews, observations, documents, focus groups, and audio-visual materials (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, designs have the most pronounced differences at the data analysis stage (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posited that "all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings" (p. 25). That fits this study. After juxtaposing qualitative approaches, I chose a basic interpretive approach to best reflect the data from this research study on academic advisors of exploratory students.

Interpretive Approach

Education is considered an applied social science because practitioners in this field address the everyday concerns of people's lives, as evident in this study. Interpretive studies are prevalent throughout the disciplines and are likely the most common form of qualitative research in education (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Seeking understanding characterizes all qualitative research. However, as described by Schlechty and Noblit (1982), interpretive research seeks understanding in one of three forms: (1) making the obvious obvious, (2) making the obvious dubious, or (3) making the hidden obvious. A basic interpretation of the data fits this study.

Epistemological Premise

An epistemological framework represents a set of assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence how research is conducted and what is considered valid knowledge (Driscoll, 2000). “Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and deals with how knowledge is gathered and from which sources” (Brown, n.d., para. 3). As a philosophical framework, it guides the researcher's inquiry, shaping their understanding of the research problem, the methods used to investigate it, and the interpretation of the findings. A researcher's philosophical standpoint has a significant influence on data interpretation and should be clearly articulated.

Constructivism

Constructivism represents my epistemological viewpoint. Constructivists believe that learners construct meaning through experience, and the interaction of prior knowledge and new events influences that meaning (Adom et al., 2016; Johnson & Bradbury, 2015; Merriam, 2008). Therefore, the researcher's task is not to uncover an objective truth but to understand how people construct their reality and the meanings they give to their experiences (Maxwell, 2013).

Application To This Study

Constructivist researchers aim to comprehend participants' experiences and subjective truths or perceptions, viewing knowledge as socially constructed and context dependent. They employ qualitative methods to explore the complexity of human experience. They do not claim objectivity but acknowledge and describe their subjectivity as they co-construct understanding with their participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A strength of constructivist research is its focus on participants' experiences, which aligns

with this examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic advisors in exploratory studies.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework supports the reason and rigor of a study, guiding data generation and analysis (Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Schlossberg's Transition Model (STM)

The theoretical framework I chose for this study is Schlossberg's Transition Model, which analyzes anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events and how individuals cope with them (Anderson et al., 2011; Schlossberg, 2011). I used the model in this study as it focuses on "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 27) and how we cope in unfamiliar environments and unexpected situations (Schlossberg, 2011). The theoretical application of the model is relevant to this research, as the pandemic was a disruptive event, and the research purpose and questions aim to understand how AAES navigated it.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their advising procedures. Four research questions guide this study.

Research Questions

RQ1: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the delivery of academic advisement to exploratory students?

RQ2: What strategies to advise exploratory students were changed or created due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What support was instrumental to academic advisors of exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect academic advisors of exploratory students?

Significance of the Study

The attainment of a college degree demonstrates valuable lessons such as navigating procedures, managing relationships, and accomplishing tasks with varying resources. Research shows that quality academic advising contributes to college success (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Ellis, 2014; Gordon & Steele, 2015). Retention and persistence to graduation are critical issues in higher education; consequently, researchers have explored the strategies, influences, and outcomes of the academic advisors' relationship with students.

Tinto's (1993) theory of departure suggests that students persist when fully integrated into the university's academic and social systems. Persistence refers to a student's academic progression toward degree completion, regardless of institutional transfers, academic programs, or institutional contexts (York et al., 2015). Continuing research on academic advising to improve it is essential, as the advising practice is critical to supporting student retention in higher education (Darling, 2015; Gordon & Steele, 2015; King, 2008). Exploring career options also has value as students learn about different fields. However, researchers have noted that prolonged indecision regarding career field selection affects student attrition and retention (Astin, 2012; Hartle, 2012; Larson & Majors, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Researchers have also identified a relationship

between coordination with academic advisement and a student's timely selection of an academic major (Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ross et al., 2012).

Academic advisors of exploratory students (AAES) are unique in the number of opportunities or touchpoints they get to influence a student. They must know students in depth to help identify their skills, passions, values, and other attributes that align with a career and major calling. They are responsible for keeping students connected as they explore their paths, which is crucial for retaining exploratory students. Their insights are vital as the students they serve consider career options. AAES must master various advising styles that adapt to different scenarios. While advisors in academic units, such as Computer Science or Business, focus on specific areas, advisors of exploratory students must be generalists regarding all academic majors. For exploratory students, coordination with academic advisors is essential to assess skills, interests, and values that help determine potential careers and identify a course of study that leads to those careers (Gordon & Steele, 2015; Spight, 2019).

This study examined how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the pandemic, the transitions they experienced, and the alterations they made to continue serving their students. A comprehensive study of academic advisement for exploratory students is valuable because it provides administrators with insight into the preparedness, preferences, and patterns of college students. Implications from this study will inform administrators, parents, students, and others about the support and guidance available for college students who are exploring and help administrators better understand the effect of AAES on retention and attrition. This study illustrates the contributions that academic advisors make to higher education institutions for exploratory students. That information

is pertinent as colleges evaluate staffing, existing programs, and the need for new ones while recovering from and adapting to an unprecedented phenomenon. Scholars must continue research to uncover new and more effective ways of understanding and assisting future generations of learners through academic advisement (Daly & Sidell, 2013; Gordon, 2007a; Gordon & Steele, 2015; Spight et al., 2023).

Researcher's Background and Positionality

To better disclose my role in this dissertation, I have included information about my higher education journey, my career in higher education, my experiences as an exploratory student, and my role as an academic advisor.

Academic History

I love structured academic learning. I have earned three college degrees: an Associate of Arts (A.A.) in Accounting, a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Business Administration, and a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Administration and Supervision. I have attended six higher education institutions: the University of Cincinnati, Southern Ohio College (A.A.), Bellarmine College, Dominican University (B.A.), Loyola University Chicago (M.Ed.), and Valdosta State University, where at the time of this writing, I am seeking an Ed.D. in Adult Learning and Development. I have also taken graduate courses at the University of North Florida and Jacksonville University.

Career in Higher Education

Throughout my 25-year career in higher education at Northwestern University, the University of North Florida, and Emory University, I served as an academic advisor, academic programs coordinator, adjunct professor, articulation representative, faculty and staff development specialist, human resources manager, instructor, instructional designer,

organizational development manager, project manager, and training manager. I gained extensive interviewing experience as a hiring manager, human resources manager, and a member of search committees.

My Exploratory College Life

For me, deciding what to study in college was both exhilarating and intimidating. Some people have a clear educational path or a solid understanding of their career goals, but the decision was not clear-cut for me. Many majors fascinated me, or perhaps I was simply afraid of making the wrong choice. As the editor of my high school newspaper, I considered majoring in journalism, but the structured four-year curriculum was a turn-off. I wanted to grow as a writer while also exploring other subjects. Majoring in journalism or any other field felt too limiting.

My search for a college that would allow me to explore my interests led me to the University of Cincinnati (UC) as a pre-law major. I was interested in becoming a lawyer, but more importantly, I appreciated the program's flexible structure. I met with my faculty advisor once and then independently created a personal 'exploratory studies program,' which did not work well. There were some successes but many more failures along my self-directed learning journey. I challenged myself to work harder, but after two years, having earned a disappointing 2.5 GPA and accumulated significant school debt, I decided to reevaluate my educational goals.

That less-than-successful exploratory experiment at UC did not dampen my desire to complete a college degree. After working full-time for a year, I was eager to resume my studies. Although I could not return to UC due to financial constraints, I serendipitously discovered a two-year college in Cincinnati that offered associate degrees

and work-study opportunities. Before enrolling, students were required to take assessments for both academic and employment placement. My results indicated I would excel in business and social sciences. The academic advisor discussed classes and career opportunities, many of which were unfamiliar to me. However, I could take courses in the morning and work part-time in the afternoon to gain experience. Realizing that my self-directed college journey had not worked well, I decided to try their format. I completed an associate's degree in accounting while gaining business experience at an insurance company. Intrigued by the transformative power of higher education, I earned both bachelor's and master's degrees. With the successful defense of this dissertation, I will complete my doctorate.

This self-reflection reveals that I am a product of an exploratory beginning, though an unstructured one, and academic advisement provided direction. The University of Cincinnati (UC), where I first explored, now offers one of the nation's most extensive Exploratory Studies programs, as mentioned in the examples section. Students at UC, who are exploring, just as I was, now receive guidance to help them find their path.

My Favorite Job Ever!

As an academic advisor, I enjoyed encouraging students and helping them find paths to reach their educational goals. I advised upper-level students in the Computer and Information Sciences (CIS) program. There were instances when students sought advice about changing majors after investing time and energy in pursuing a CIS degree. Some lost interest in the field. Others had some grades indicating that they should consider another field of study. A desire to change majors was not uncommon at the time, just as it remains today. It has been reported that 55% of college students changed their major at

least once (Lederman, 2017; NCES, 2021; University of Tulsa, 2020). Regardless of why a student wanted to change majors, we did not have an academic advising unit specifically designed to assist students at a crossroads and needing help with the transition.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to the intentional boundaries or restrictions that define the scope of a study.

1. The participant advised exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The participant was an academic advisor at a four-year institution during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Higher education institutions with exploratory programs requiring students to choose a cognate or track, such as Business or Technology, were omitted.
4. Higher education institutions that provided resources for student academic exploration but did not have a separate advising unit were omitted.

Definitions

Microsoft Teams - is a communication and collaboration software application that allows users to chat, meet, share files, and more. It is designed to help users stay connected and organized, whether remotely or in the office.

Multipotentiality - is a term that describes people with many interests and skills across different areas.

Survey Course - an introductory class that provides a broad overview of a subject area. It is designed for college students with little to no prior knowledge in that field. The

course provides students with a foundational understanding before they dive deeper into specialized courses.

Zoom - a cloud-based video conferencing platform that allows users to communicate using audio and video. Users can share their screens, files, and text chat.

Chapter Summary

The chapter opened with a timeline of COVID-19's spread, its impact on higher education, descriptions of exploratory students, and examples of exploratory programs. An overview of academic advising, a statement of the problem, and a description of my conceptual framework that serves as a foundation for the study. I concluded the chapter by outlining my research purpose, four research questions (RQ1–RQ4), the significance of the study, my background, delimitations, limitations, and definitions.

In Chapter II, I reviewed studies on various aspects of indecision and undecidedness among college students, yielding conflicting results. Studies about the development of academic advising in higher education were reviewed and synthesized. I identified research gaps regarding the academic advisors of exploratory students before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I also reviewed the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, Schlossberg's Transition Model, and constructivism from an epistemological perspective.

Chapter III is the Method chapter and includes a description of the purposeful selection process, the participants and their institutions, and my background. I also described a theoretical framework, Schlossberg's Transition Model (STM), and the concepts of reflexivity, trustworthiness, and member checks.

Chapter IV presents the data generated from interviews regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results were derived from Schlossberg's Transition Model and a thematic analysis, which identified significant categories, themes, and subthemes based on semi-structured interviews. The impact of the pandemic is illustrated through participants' quotes from the onset of the pandemic to its subsequent recovery.

Chapter V contains a discussion of my findings and suggested recommendations for future study.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to understand how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their advising procedures. Searches through multiple academic databases uncovered journals, articles, dissertations, and books related to the research topic.

Research studies have been conducted on college academic advisors during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. There are also studies on academic advisors and their exploratory advisees. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how academic advisors of exploratory students supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are studies on other topics related to this research that have been evaluated and critiqued, including the evolution of perceptions about undecided students, the history of academic advising, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, and Schlossberg's Transition Model (STM) as a theoretical framework in higher education scenarios.

Colleges and universities use various terms for students who do not have an academic major. I use each term as it is defined in the literature.

The Discovery of Undecided Students

Much of the early information about undecided students came from studies investigating another aspect of higher education. The first recorded study on undecided students, as cited by Crites (1969), occurred in 1927 when R.B. Cunliffe surveyed first-year college students in Detroit about their vocational goals. He reported that nine percent

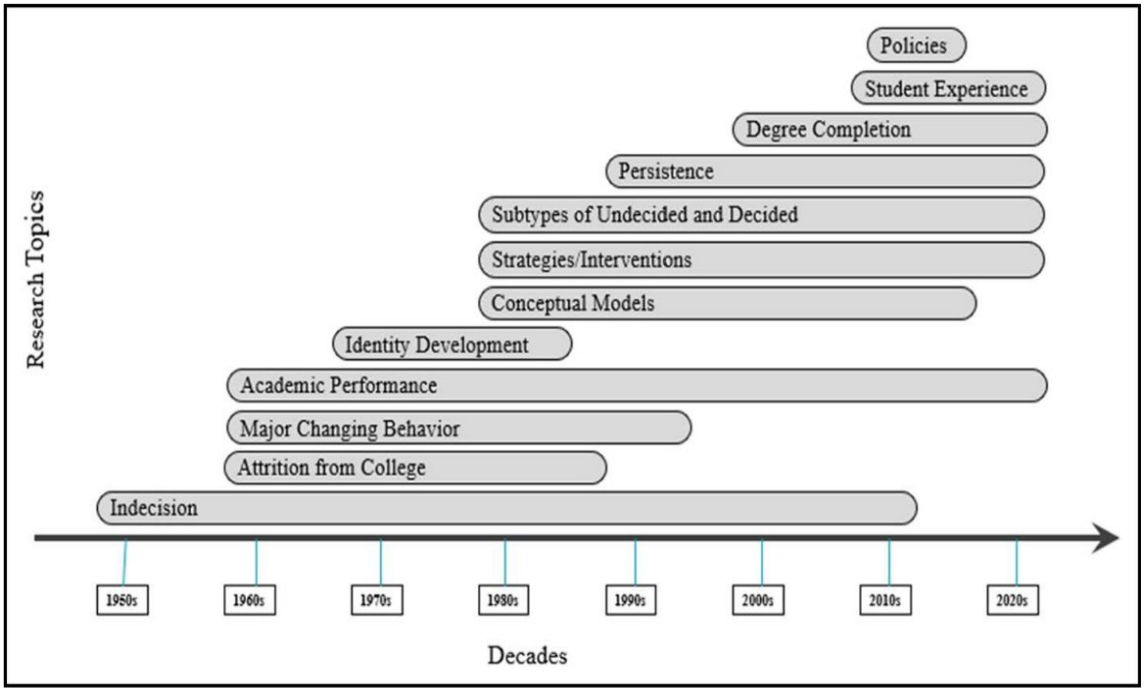
of the students who responded to the survey indicated they were undecided (Gordon & Steele, 2015). Later, an investigation into whether college men were vocationally motivated based on their academic choices revealed that a lack of vocational choice and occupational goals influenced the students' decisions on which classes to take and the quality of their work (Achilles, 1935). In another study, a survey of students' moral and religious attitudes toward vocational choices indicated that 26%, or over one-fourth of the respondents, had no vocational choice (Nelson & Nelson, 1940).

Growth In Higher Education Research

Figure 3 illustrates some research topics on undecided students from the 1950s to the 2020s.

Figure 3

Research on Undecided Students Over Time



Note. From Spight, D. B., Mooney, D., & Orr, R. (2023). *A Historiographic Review of the Research on Undecided Students*. NACADA Review, *4*(2), 78-91.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, provided education grants and stipends to World War II veterans, enabling students who previously could not afford college to pursue higher education with financial support (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). With a larger population of college students to study, researchers aimed to differentiate between indecision and indecisiveness. Tyler (1953) asserted that negative thinking and poor habits contributed to indecisiveness, while Ziller (1957) noted that both indecision and indecisiveness reflected an unwillingness to take risks. Research by Tyler (1953) revealed that the opinions and attitudes of family and friends hindered academic decision-making. According to Super (1957), immaturity influences indecisiveness, and there is a developmental sequence in the decision-making process.

Career decision-making is a part of the exploration process where individuals clarify their interests, skills, and values and then connect those to a specific career field. Both Super (1957) and Tyler (1953) reported that undecided college students are at different phases in understanding how things relate to each other. However, researchers noted that a person will not make decisions later if earlier obstacles remain unresolved (Holland & Nichols, 1964; Tyler, 1953).

Golden Age of Research in Higher Education

The socially significant and turbulent 1960s and 1970s also marked a golden age of research in higher education (Thelin, 2019). Research flourished with the availability of a more extensive and diverse student body, including studies on undecided and indecisive students (NACADA, 2019).

Indecision, Decidedness, and Undecidedness

In Holland and Nichols' (1964) research on indecision, students who were National Merit finalists identified by their demonstrated exceptional academic achievement as indicated by their performance on the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) were the subjects. The study found that intellectual curiosity and creativity are key characteristics for some undecided National Merit finalists. However, Zytowski (1965) suggested that there are instances where indecision indicates avoidance behavior, and some students may not choose a career direction because working repels them or due to a fear of commitment. Ashby et al. (1966) categorized first-year students into three types: those who were decided, those who were tentatively undecided, and those who were undecided. The researchers compared these three groups and found no differences in personality, school, and family background variables. However, there were differences in academic ability and achievement. The results indicated that undecided and decided students were academically superior to those who were tentatively decided (Ashby et al., 1966).

In one of the most extensive studies of its time, Baird (1969) used the American College Test (ACT) scores of 12,000 students to examine the differences in academic aptitude and educational goals between undecided and decided. The researcher determined no differences in the composite ACT mean scores between decided and undecided students.

Support for Undecided Students

As college enrollment grew, institutions expanded their student development efforts (Cremin, 1964). In 1966, the Ohio State University (OSU) established a

University College with the intent to “advise lower-division students on curricular matters, support them in their initial year or two of enrollment, and hand them off to a degree-granting unit once they had settled on a thoughtful, workable choice” (Minnick, 1993, p. 58). This University College concept is a forerunner to today's exploratory studies programs.

In 1973, an OSU graduate student, Virginia Gordon, began leading the division of the University College that supported students who were undecided about their majors. That set her on a 40+ year journey, becoming an accomplished scholar-practitioner in the field of undecided students. Gordon (1981) described the undecided student as “one who is unready, unwilling, or unable to commit themselves to occupational or educational decisions after graduating from high school” (p. x). Her research significantly altered how colleges viewed undecided students and prompted institutions to shift away from requiring students to declare a major upon admission (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Grites (1981) wrote that waiting to select a major is the healthiest approach to entering the complex environment of the college campus, which supports earlier studies by Akenson and Beecher (1967) and Titley and Titley (1980). However, a controversy arose when Hartman and Fuqua (1983) and Hartman and Hartman (1982) cautioned that being an undecided college student is unhealthy and problematic, in direct contrast to Grites (1981). Later, Lewallen (1993) asserted that previous researchers had not thoroughly analyzed degree completion information on exploratory students, and he used national data on 20,000 students to conduct empirical analysis. Lewallen found that the factors leading to attrition were the same for both decided and undecided students. However, he also concluded that staying as an undecided student for an extended period

has implications for attrition. Tinto (1993) agreed that prolonged indecision can lead to not completing an undergraduate degree.

Characteristics of Undecided Students

Researchers have attempted to categorize the different characteristics of undecided students. Some focused on first-year students. Several studies were done to classify undecided levels and the subtypes that emerged. Other studies investigated demographics.

First-Year Students

Appel et al. (1970) and Rose and Elton (1971) compared first-year undeclared students who persisted through graduation with those who left college by the end of their fourth quarter. They concluded that the students who left early or made situation-specific decisions represented a population of adolescents experiencing identity confusion. Holland and Holland (1977) and Osipow (1999) echoed the findings of Appel et al. and Rose and Elton. The researchers reported that students who consider themselves undecided do not differ in personal characteristics except in their sense of identity and vocational maturity. In another study, Jones and Chenery (1980) noted that first-year undecided students displayed a vague sense of identity, low career salience, discomfort, a lack of self-confidence, and a desire for independence from significant others.

Gender and Sex-role

Researchers also investigated the relationship between the gender of subjects and vocational undecidedness. No gender differences were found between decided and undecided students by Anderson (1989), Foote (1980), and Harren (1979). However, in other studies, females were more likely to be undecided and influenced by family

members (Pearson & Dellman-Jenkins, 1997), experience role conflict and a fear of success (Orlofsky, 1978), as well as anxiety and low self-confidence (Slaney et al., 1981). Male undecided students were found to be nonconforming (Rose & Elton, 1971). When Gianakos and Subich (1986) surveyed 191 undeclared undergraduate students to examine the effects of gender and sex-role identity on vocational indecision, they suggested sex-role orientation was more reliable than gender in understanding undecided students, and androgynous persons were more undecided than those in traditional sex roles.

Categories and Subtypes

An investigation by Newman et al. (1990) observed that research on undecided students had moved from exploring characteristics to defining subtypes. Gordon (1998) reviewed 15 studies that found similarities and differences between the researchers. She proposed seven subtypes of college students when it pertained to decision-making: (a) very decided, (b) somewhat decided, (c) unstable decided, (d) tentatively undecided, (e) developmentally undecided, (f) seriously undecided, and (g) chronically indecisive.

However, in contrast to categorization, Schein and Laff (1997) recommended a student-centered approach when dealing with indecisiveness. In their model, a student would say, “I am interested in counseling people,” rather than saying, “I am interested in psychology.” In short, Schein and Laff (1997) engaged students in designing a major rather than having them select one. Another researcher, Bertram (1996), challenged established Western cultural paradigms associated with decision-making. He questioned the ability of traditional-aged undecided students to perform decision-making with wisdom.

Jurgens (2000) investigated career uncertainty and indecision among undeclared students. One result was that even a primary and cost-effective intervention benefited the students. However, Kelly and Pulver (2003) suggested there are disparities in the results from research on undecided students due to (a) the shortage of predictive evidence, (b) the failure to consider academic aptitudes, (c) the use of "convenience samples" that include decided as well as undecided subjects, (d) statistical interpretations, and (e) the variation in the personality variables included in the studies. To provide fresh insight, Cuseo (2005) recommended that the focus could be on declaration patterns instead of categorizing students as decided or undecided.

A study by Hagstrom et al. (1997) involving undecided upper-class students identified significant themes, including fear of commitment, self-doubt, low self-esteem, family issues, and reluctance to seek help, as traits contributing to their indecision. At some point, a firmer and aggressive approach is necessary when advising advanced undeclared students, as Gordon (2007a) suggested. Discussions should focus on whether majors must be eliminated or how to combine alternatives into a single one. However, as Gordon and Steele (2015) wrote in their comprehensive book, "No program or service designed for exploratory students will be successful without the individual's readiness to participate" (p. 183).

Assessing Attributes

Several discoveries were reported in a study by Buford and Nester (2019). Undecided students completed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and underwent an individual or group verification process with a certified practitioner. In the MBTI results, the descriptors of undecided students reflected a reluctance to do things in

traditional ways, a tendency to become bored or sidetracked, impatience when working with rigid structures, and a tendency to be unrealistic about the time it takes, among other characteristics. In the same study, each student chose one of three divergent authors of popular career books and wrote a reflective essay explaining why that approach resonated with their career philosophy. Sixty-four percent chose the author who wrote about multipotentiality. The students openly voiced pleasure at the existence of an alternative to the traditional career narratives.

The students also completed the CliftonStrengths assessment. *Restorative,* a strength for identifying and solving problems, appeared in the top five themes for nearly 50% of the students. That indicated they quickly identified and voiced potential issues with their prospective majors. However, the combination of *restorative strength* and *adaptability* created a unique pattern. Students may find themselves in a vicious cycle of evaluating potential majors or careers, quickly identifying problems, including imagined ones, and then utilizing their adaptability to shift gears and explore a new possible path. According to Buford and Nester (2019), a student in this cognitive loop may struggle to progress.

Retention and Matriculation

In 2014, the Student Success Collaborative provided the Education Advisory Board (EAB) with six years of data from 10 institutions, covering over 78,000 students who either graduated or left the institutions in the collaborative. The EAB found that college students open to changing their major were likelier to graduate than those who immediately decided on a major (Straumsheim, 2016). The data concurred with earlier researchers, including Gordon (1981), Grites (1981), and Titley and Titley (1980), who

found that switching majors can be a positive experience. This is because students who switch may be responding to their changing interests and maturation as they transition into young adulthood. In another study, Spight (2020) used data from a large research university and found that matriculating as undeclared versus declared did not significantly impact the likelihood of graduating in four years. With six-year rates, however, undeclared students were more likely to graduate, which conflicted with Lewallen's (1993) earlier conclusion.

A surplus of passions and career interests often leaves college students unwilling to foreclose on options, according to Cueso (2005) and Straumsheim (2016). They are aware that the average American changes jobs every 4.2 years (Gallup Workplace, 2017) and often ends up in fields that are significantly different from their college studies. Buford and Nester (2019) suggested that some of today's exploratory college students question the definition of successful and meaningful work in income-driven and established professions. Straumsheim (2016) stated that the assistance they seek is in making their definitions a reality.

EAB researchers challenged the notion that changing majors kept students in college past their intended graduation date. Ed Venit, a senior director at the EAB, said, “Maybe the most important decision is the final major you choose” (Straumsheim, 2016, para. 3). Timothy M. Renick, former vice provost and vice president for student success at Georgia State University, was also quoted in the article. “We were not doing a good job fitting students into the right major. There's no value in forcing a student's hand. An ill-informed choice is worse than no choice at all.” (Straumsheim, 2016, para. 22).

Summary

College students enrolled without an academic major are a complex and innovative group inclined to find their way when other options do not seem to fit. Their undecidedness is not due to a lack of talent or passion. Researchers agree that it is challenging to advise diverse exploratory students, as they bring a unique set of characteristics that require their advisers' specific attention and consideration.

Academic Advising

This literature review section evaluates and critiques studies on academic advising in U.S. higher education institutions.

Background

Public colleges established in the colonies mirrored the models of Cambridge and Oxford in England. As Gallagher and Demos (1983) chronicled, the collegiate faculty was comprised of clergy members whose primary aim was to educate young men to become gentlemen. Known as the collegiate way, professors had a profound impact on students' academic and personal lives, often sharing residences and maintaining close advising relationships both inside and outside the classroom. In the late eighteenth century, the newly formed United States of America welcomed its first colleges after shedding its British colonial status. One of the changes that occurred shortly thereafter was a shift in focus for faculty members, who concentrated more on their specialized areas of study and less on disciplining students.

With the proliferation of colleges throughout the nineteenth century, academic guidance secured its role in education. Shaffer et al. (2010) suggested that in 1841, Kenyon College offered advising as a service to counsel students on educational, social,

and personal matters. Rudolph (1990) reported that in 1889, Harvard University established a board of advisers for first-year students as the size and elective curriculum required more focused attention to undergraduate guidance than was feasible with an increasingly professional faculty. Doermann (1926) stated that the University of Minnesota recommended that faculty advisers be completely willing to inform themselves in all matters regarding the complicated problems of educational and vocational advisement. Doermann, Rudolph, and Shaffer et al. all document the growth in academic advising in higher education with expectations to counsel students in various ways.

Academic advising continued to grow, as Gillespie (2003) noted that the U.S. Army assigned World War I recruits to specific occupations based on their skills and intelligence. Seeing the army's successful approach, universities established vocational guidance centers that utilized occupational aptitude assessments to advise students on their academic pursuits. Zunker (2008) reported that throughout and after World War II, a similar growth occurred in classifying students' interests and aptitudes. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, the influx of baby boomers on college campuses brought social justice, access, utility, and accountability issues to light. Gordon (2007b) and Komives et al. (2009) agreed that the demand for enhanced student advising has increased due to student developmental issues emerging as a significant academic concern.

National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)

A review of academic advising in higher education would not be complete without acknowledging the role of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). The organization evolved from the first National Conference on Academic

Advising in 1977 to an association representing an international academic advising community of 14,000 members (NACADA, 2025). In its "A Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising," NACADA outlined the responsibilities of advisors to students, institutions, higher education, their educational community, and themselves (NACADA, 2017). With NACADA, academic advising evolved from a prescriptive, authoritarian approach to a more developmental style (Cook, 2009). The association has collaborated with Kansas State University on graduate certificate, M.A., and Ph.D. programs in academic advising (Kansas State University, 2024).

Cook (2009) and Propp and Rhodes (2006) found that the organization's contribution to academic advising has been substantial, including the promotion and publication of research on all aspects of academic advising. The association has several subgroups, including one for advisors who work with undecided students. To many, NACADA and academic advising are inseparable. Habley (2009) wrote: "No professional association so thoroughly represents a field of endeavor; *NACADA* cannot be adequately separated from either *academic advising* or the *field of advising*" (p. 76).

Academic Advising Defined

O'Banion (1972) defined advising as a process in which the advisor and advisee enter a dynamic relationship. The advisor serves as a teacher and guide in an interactive partnership to enhance the student's self-awareness and fulfillment. Burton and Wellington (1998) agreed with O'Banion's academic advising model. Troxel (2018) also described developmental advising as concerned with specific personal or vocational decisions and facilitating the student's rational processes, interpersonal interactions, problem-solving, and decision-making skills.

NACADA commissioned a task force to develop a definition; however, the group was unable to agree on a single definition (NACADA, 2006). *Advising is teaching* became popular among the advising community; however, Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) felt that the teaching phrase only captured one aspect of academic advising, and they critiqued the paradigm in "*Advising is advising*." Wang and Houdyshell (2021) described advising as a series of planned interactions between students and advisors to discuss program requirements, course specifications, learning outcomes, and other program topics. Williams (2007) noted that advising college students is a professional endeavor integral to fulfilling the mission of higher education in teaching and learning. Humorously, Cate and Miller (2015) wrote: "The definitions of academic advising equal the number of postsecondary institutions." (p. 41).

Demographics

Until the 1970s, faculty members primarily provided academic advising, but the number of academic advisors grew exponentially when institutions hired dedicated, full-time advisors (Cook, 2009; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008). In many colleges, advisors are in specific academic units, the Provost's Office, or an extension of student or academic affairs (Cate & Miller, 2015; Kuhn & Padak, 2008).

Couture and Tyson (2022) surveyed 1,062 NACADA members in advising roles from 15 countries and all 50 U.S. states. The demographic results of the survey were 82.3% of the participants identified as White, 5.4% as Latino, 4.8% as African American, 3.4% as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1.5% as mixed, 1.3% as other, and less than 1% as Native American, Aleut, or Aboriginal Peoples. In other demographics, 82.7% identified as female, 16.6% as male, and less than 1% as non-binary or other. Lastly, the

survey revealed that 99% held bachelor's degrees, 84% held master's degrees, and 14% held doctoral degrees.

Thirty U.S. institutions offer graduate-level academic advising courses. As mentioned in the NACADA description, Kansas State University's Global Campus has collaborated with NACADA to offer a certificate and a master's degree in Academic Advising, as well as a Ph.D. in Leadership in Academic Advising (Kansas State University, 2024). However, research by Daly and Sidell (2013) revealed that academic advisors primarily acquire their experience through on-the-job training. Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015) found that most academic advisors did not plan to become one. Nevertheless, Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015), Donnelly (2009), and Rubin (2017) concurred that academic advisors are generally satisfied with their work.

Academic Advising Responsibilities

Academic Advisor responsibilities vary across institutions. As Champlin-Scharff (2010) and Fuller et al. (2022) noted, academic advising can encompass degree or major requirements, course selections, career direction, on-campus involvement, difficulties with a professor, and, at times, mental and physical well-being. Advisors are also responsible for understanding and communicating academic policies, curriculum, graduation requirements, and strategies for student success (Adams et al., 2013). However, there were debates over the significance of academic advising roles and responsibilities as practitioners and scholars had great difficulty defining their work for years. As noted by Kuhn and Padak (2009) and Trombley and Holmes (1981), little research had addressed the effectiveness of advising in the 1980s, and the situation had not improved much by the 1990s, according to Habley (2009).

However, two things helped clarify the roles and responsibilities of professional academic advising. In 2005, NACADA developed a normative theory of advising, and it became a framework to advance the field toward professionalization. Then, a landmark empirical study from the Center for Public Education revealed that students at 2- or 4-year institutions who met with academic advisors "either 'sometimes' or 'often'" improved their odds of persisting by 53% (Klepfer & Hull, 2012, p. 8). In addition, one of the three indicators of future student success was meeting with advisors before enrollment. That study highlighted the impact of advising on student success and demonstrated to institutional stakeholders the fiscal value of advising (Klepfer & Hull, 2012).

Advisors and Advisees

Advising programs must have commitment, capacity, and curiosity to create a culture focused on student learning, according to Pelia-Shuster (2016) and Zarges et al. (2018). They must be significant learning experiences involving more than just recalling information. Fink (2013) wrote that academic advising should make a difference in how students live and think and what they do and value. Researchers have reported that academic advisors are responsible for educating students and creating opportunities to address outcomes related to their educational journey, but the relationships between advisees and advisors vary (Aljets et al., 2018; Coll & Draves, 2009; Ross et al., 2012). Some advisees and advisors develop solid bonds and frequently meet. In contrast, others meet once a semester, as required, to discuss future course scheduling, as reported in research studies by Aljets (2018) and Zarges et al. (2018).

Tinto's (1993) theory, often referred to as the "Model of Institutional Departure" or "Student Integration Model," posits that students' success and persistence in college

are heavily influenced by their ability to integrate into both the academic and social aspects of the university environment. Academic integration involves students' coursework engagement, interactions with faculty, and overall academic performance. Social integration encompasses students' involvement in extracurricular activities, relationships with peers, and a sense of belonging within the college community.

Retention and Persistence

Some advisors also play a significant role in helping students develop a sense of belonging, which is one of the primary influences on student persistence, as Tinto (2017) further described. Studies by Aljets (2018), Klepfer and Hull (2012), and Ross et al. (2012) indicated that students who participate in academic advising have higher rates of retention and persistence to graduation. Researchers Aljets (2018) and Zarges et al. (2018) postulated that advisors provide valuable information as they identify recurring issues, including systemic barriers preventing students from graduating. Advisors must, however, maintain ongoing engagement with students, according to Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015). They should also keep pace with students' evolving needs, as Gordon and Steele (2015) recommended, and encourage their advisees to consider lifelong learning, as Lowenstein and Bloom (2016) suggested.

Assessment and Accountability

Although meaningful advising improves the student's learning experience, as agreed by Campbell and Nutt (2008) and Gordon and Steele (2015), changes in funding, curriculum, students, and faculty have collectively influenced how students have been advised (Daly & Sidell, 2013; Fuller et al., 2022). Assessment of academic advising is used to guide the design of strategies and actions and gather evidence to support

improvement and funding. However, Banta and Palomba (2014) argue that institutions should be cautious in claiming a causal relationship between advising and retention without acknowledging the numerous internal and external factors contributing to a student's ability to persist to graduation. Robbins (2012) further described how current and former students provide valuable insights into the roles advising plays in persistence to graduation, and assessment data help determine whether caseloads are optimal to meet the needs of students. However, if advisors' roles vary, creating a cohesive assessment plan across an institution can be challenging (Miller, 2012).

A critical aspect of academic advising is conveying information to students in a way that encourages engaged learning. Mattei et al. (2014) and Peters et al. (2023) agree that institutions should select tools that support their mission, goals, and outcomes and that align with advising practices. Recent developments in social media, audiovisual platforms, analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI) offer resources to guide advising efforts, better distribute resources and services, enhance student learning, and increase persistence toward graduation (Chen & Upah, 2020; Xyst, 2017).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, the acronym COVID-19 for Coronavirus Disease 2019 became known worldwide. Hooper et al. (2020) and Tasso et al. (2021) investigated the immediate and profoundly disruptive worldwide phenomenon, which had devastating medical, psychological, and financial impacts. The pandemic's unfolding and the uncertainty about its threat to human life challenged us all. Researchers Asmundson and Taylor (2020), Boyle et al. (2020), and Garfin et al. (2020) reported on the effects of public policy and psychological factors, including virus-related fear, while Horesh and

Brown (2020) reported on societal depression, anxiety, and traumatic stress. Additionally, researchers conducted several studies on the impact of the pandemic on postsecondary institutions.

The Effects on Higher Education

To reduce the spread of the coronavirus, leaders at colleges and universities instituted safety measures that included moving in-person classes to online formats (Neuwirth et al., 2020), requiring non-essential personnel to work remotely (Soria, 2023), reducing campus operations, and closing housing and residence life facilities. They also had to make urgent and important decisions about what to do with international students (Soria, 2023), how to communicate decisions (Calonge et al., 2021), and what support students and professors needed in online learning (McMillan et al., 2020).

Bradley et al. (2020) and Cipriano et al. (2021) investigated how administrators had to decide when and how to reopen the campus and the impact on the surrounding community. In addition, due to the pandemic's uncertainty regarding enrollment, state allotments, and endowments, some colleges and universities implemented hiring freezes and furloughs to reduce operating costs (Salazar et al., 2020).

Peters et al. (2023) and Williamson and Eynon (2020) noted that recent technological advancements have allowed universities to automate tasks and mobilize staff to ensure student learning and course completion. However, Neuwirth et al. (2020) reported that some professors were uncomfortable with the online teaching environment, and some students did not conduct themselves online as expected in a typical face-to-face classroom setting; they did not ask questions or respond to direct inquiries about issues or needs as would have been the practice in the past.

The Effects on College Students

The sudden shift from the pandemic created challenging situations for many students, especially those systematically disadvantaged, marginalized, and minoritized in higher education (Soria et al., 2022; Soria & Horgos, 2021a, 2021b). Even before the pandemic, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2016) reported that a considerable number of young adults were already grappling with varying degrees of emotional and behavioral struggles. College student populations experienced mental health struggles such as depression and anxiety, as reported by Eisenberg et al. (2007) and Gallagher (2014); substance abuse, as reported by Zullig and Divin (2012); and eating disorders, researched by Eisenberg et al. (2011). Suicidality was reported on by Li et al. (2020), Zullig and Divin (2012), and Yozwiak et al. (2012), while Banyard (2015), the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2016), and Warrener and Tasso (2017) reported a range of interpersonal complications among college students.

Pan (2020) reported that although college-aged individuals had been one of the least medically vulnerable groups to COVID-19, they were arguably among the most impacted psychosocially. Some students experienced an abrupt departure from their dormitories and returned home, while other students may not have had a place to return to (American Council on Education, 2020; Blankstein et al., 2020; Sebong et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). Other students may have lost their income, or a family member may have lost theirs, and the family may struggle to sustain essential needs (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Lawley et al., 2023; Soria et al., 2022). Commuter students experienced a disruption in their daily routines and possibly an even more significant compromise in their ability to remain connected with classmates, and others did not have regular access

to private spaces to conduct and participate in ongoing academic work, according to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2022). Neuwirth et al. (2020) found that, in some cases, students had the additional responsibility of caring for a loved one. Blankstein et al. (2020), Pan (2020), and Soria (2023b) reported that college students experienced a halt to in-person social activities that are typical of college life. They had concerns about themselves, a roommate, or a loved one contracting COVID-19.

Approximately 20% of non-graduating students said they would not return in the fall 2020 semester or were unsure of their plans (Blankstein et al., 2020). Reasons included financial constraints, as reported by Soria et al. (2022); a perceived decrease in the educational value of online instruction compared to in-person instruction, as posited by Clabaugh et al. (2021); and difficulty with online learning (Klebs et al., 2021). However, Third Way (2021) reported that most students did not believe the disruptions had damaged their return on investment in attending college. Much of America reopened in 2021, but Fawcett (2022) reported that college-aged students stayed away in record numbers. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported that in fall 2021, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States was 3 percent lower than in fall 2020. This continued the downward trend in undergraduate enrollment observed before the coronavirus pandemic. However, research from Third Way (2021) showed a growing positive report by college students regarding how their institutions handled the crisis. Eighty-one percent of students believed their institution had dealt with the pandemic as well as it could, 79% felt the institution had communicated clearly, and 79% thought their school was well-equipped to handle future emergencies.

According to Subedi et al. (2020) and Peters et al. (2023), technological tools played a crucial role during the pandemic, enabling higher education institutions to facilitate student learning and advisement during the closure. However, Blankstein et al. (2020) reported that students often seemed mentally elsewhere; they were not as engaged as in traditional face-to-face classes and advising services. Students from lower-resourced or rural communities had less access to technology, high-speed internet, or safe and academically conducive environments during the pandemic (Campus Technology, 2020). To support continued online education, institutions provided computers and online hotspots to students; however, not all institutions could offer the same resources to their students. In addition, increased demand for video cameras and laptops delayed access to technology for several months. Students with strong internet connections often competed for internet resources with family members who worked remotely from home and those engaged in remote schooling (Peters et al., 2023). With the number of disruptions to their lives, Tasso et al. (2021) posited that college students have not received sufficient scientific attention regarding the effects of the pandemic.

The Effects on Academic Advising

Academic advisors were encouraged to gain knowledge of and use advising technologies as a core competency (NACADA, 2017), as technology can enhance student experience, increase retention, improve student success, and enhance student learning outcomes (Pasquini, 2011; Steele, 2016). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, academic advisors used various advising technologies to support students (Steele, 2014, 2016; Underwood & Anderson, 2018). However, academic advising shifted primarily to remote work and virtual appointments during the pandemic. As reported by Peters et al. (2023)

and Wang et al. (2022), many institutions continued to offer virtual services throughout the 2020-2021 academic year. Academic advisors utilized online virtual conferencing programs, such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Microsoft Teams, to connect with students during the pandemic.

Serving as potentially the only contact a student may have with a higher education professional during the pandemic, academic advisors provided opportunities for students to stay connected to resources and receive support as they navigated online classes, isolation, and technology issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. When in-person advising resumed, and it was available along with online, students and advisors highlighted that they were able to build advising relationships within both modalities. Students believed that advisors gave their full attention during virtual appointments and experienced few interruptions due to technical difficulties (Peters et al., 2023).

Researchers conducted studies to examine the effects of COVID-19 on academic advising. Some of those studies examined student experiences with academic advising during the pandemic (Ernst, 2022; Fuller et al., 2022; Soria, 2023a), the management of academic advising during COVID-19 (Abumalloh et al., 2021), student disparities in access to advising during the pandemic (Soria, 2023a), how advisors coped during the pandemic (Fuller et al., 2022; Soria & Horgos, 2021a; Survase & Johnson, 2023), and the use of remote synchronous technology to advise students during COVID-19 (Peters et al., 2023; Wang & Houdyshell, 2021).

A study by Soria (2023a) focused on college students with significantly higher odds of lacking access to academic advising during the pandemic. It measured undeclared students along with first- and second-year, lower-income, transgender or gender-

nonconforming, bisexual, fraternity/sorority residents, and students with multiple disabilities. That study helped to fill a gap in understanding how academic advisors in exploratory programs supported students during the pandemic.

Schlossberg's Transition Model

Schlossberg (1981) defined a transition as any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Her model serves as a mechanism for "analyzing human adaptation to transition" (p. 2). Heppner (1998) and Heppner et al. (1994) reported that transition is the internal psychological process humans experience in adapting to an external change in tasks, positions, or occupations. Anderson et al. (2011) and Super (1990) suggested that a transition occurs over time and becomes more pronounced with a shift in one's self-concept.

How Transition Affects Us

According to Chickering and Schlossberg (2002), transitions can be disabling as they disrupt relationships, responsibilities, and roles. The researchers discovered that transitions alter our experience of existence and lead us to form new assumptions about ourselves. Schlossberg (2011) reported that perception affects the transition process. For example, transitioning to college might be exciting and anticipatory for one person, yet scary and daunting for another. In many cases, those experiencing transition face life disturbances that require adaptation, even when the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Bobek et al. (2013), Savickas (2013), and Super and Knasel (1981) argue that transitions are also contextual, heavily influenced by one's relationship to the environment in which the transition takes place and to the individuals within that environment.

Schlossberg (2011) wrote that changes occur quickly, but a transition happens

over time. As Bobek and Robbins (2005) and Bobek et al. (2013) attest, the amount of time required to experience a transition varies based on several factors, including the nature of the transition and the connection to both the old and new situations. Anderson et al. (2012), Bobek et al. (2013), Ebberwein et al. (2004), and Schlossberg (1981, 2011) agreed that regardless of the amount of time spent, individuals may respond to similar transitions differently, depending on when in their life the transition occurs and whether individuals interpret the transition as a positive or negative addition. Although the goal is for the person to experience a positive emergent growth process following the transition, the researchers explained that the complexity of a transition may evoke feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, or depression in the person.

Bobek et al. (2013). Bobek and Robbins (2005), Yang and Gysbers (2007), and Super (1975, 1990) have described how the transition can lead to psychological consequences if it involves the loss of daily structures, social support, or systematic routines. These consequences may include a lack of confidence, low self-worth, diminished self-esteem, isolation, loss of identity, weakened self-efficacy, or a sense of being devalued, along with impaired coping skills.

Applications for Schlossberg's Model

This transition theory remains one of the few models for analyzing human adaptation. The theory applies to various transitions adults encounter and attempts to make sense of the factors that cause people to grow or deteriorate during transition periods. (Anderson et al., 2011). Some factors contribute to why some individuals navigate transitions relatively easily while others become discouraged and struggle to cope. Researchers used Schlossberg's framework in higher education inquiries, including

Byrd (2017) in counseling underrepresented transfer students in a teacher education program, Workman (2015) evaluating exploratory students with first-year academic advising, Pendleton (2007) analyzing coping strategies used by seven welfare recipients attending postsecondary institutions, and Ryan et al. (2011) studying veterans transitioning from the military to college.

Summary

The literature on exploratory college students, academic advising, COVID-19, and Schlossberg's Transition Model contained valuable information to synthesize and evaluate for this study. The historical aspects, revelations, in-depth analyses, and comparisons provided a clearer understanding of the research study's aspects and a rationale for conducting this study. Much of the research is older or not specifically addressing COVID-19 or AAES. This study aims to fill a gap in understanding how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their advising practices.

Chapter III is the next section of this dissertation, which outlines the methods employed in conducting the study. It includes a description of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the analytical paradigm used to interpret the data, the methodological procedures, and information about the participants.

Chapter III

METHOD

When a student enters a college's exploratory studies division, the student and the institution expect the guided exploration, which includes academic advisement, to occur promptly and sequentially so that the student can matriculate to graduation. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and altered college campus operations.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their advising procedures. Four research questions guide this study.

Research Questions

RQ1: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the delivery of academic advisement to exploratory students?

RQ2: What strategies to advise exploratory students were changed or created during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What support was instrumental to academic advisors of exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect academic advisors of exploratory students?

In the following sections, I describe the components of my conceptual framework that served as the overarching foundation for this study. Additionally, descriptions of the

interview process, the population sample, the purposive selection of participants, and their respective institutions are provided. I concluded the chapter by discussing how data was generated, my background, reflexivity, ethics, and the achievement of trustworthiness in the results.

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a conceptual framework provides a structured way for the investigator to organize, identify, and connect different concepts. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) described the conceptual framework as comprising all the components of research that either support the reason for the study or contribute to its rigor. As my research progressed, I realized how what seemed like minor components either contributed to the study's reason or the rigor. The following sections outline key aspects of my conceptual framework, including my research design, approach, epistemology, and theoretical frameworks relevant to this study.

Research Design

Qualitative research seeks to gain insight into events, situations, or phenomena, aiming to understand people's interpretations of the world and their experiences as these interpretations of reality evolve over time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011; Seidman, 2013). "The human instrument is the only data collection instrument that is multifaceted enough and complex enough to capture the important elements of a human experience" (Maykut & Morehouse, 2002, p. 27).

Qualitative research supports storytelling as participants describe their perceptions and experiences through interviews. The data generated are thick, rich descriptions that provide nimble and valuable data (Elliott & Timulak, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

and are ideal for this study. According to Maxwell (2013):

> Qualitative research is intended to help you better understand (a) the meanings and perspectives of the people you study, seeing the world from their point of view rather than simply from your own; (b) how these perspectives are shaped by, and shape, their physical, social, and cultural contexts; and (c) the specific processes that are involved in maintaining or altering these phenomena and relationships. (p. viii)

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that qualitative research methods emphasize the "emic or insider's perspective, versus the etic or outsider's view" (p. 16), specifically honoring the participants' perspectives and experiences. This aligns with the stated goal of this study: How did experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic impact academic advisors of exploratory students? What changes from the experience remain? How do those academic advisors make sense of it now? As Maxwell (2017) expressed, reality is always more complex than any theory can completely capture.

Interpretive Approach

Interpretation involves assigning significance to the findings, making sense of them, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extracting lessons, making inferences, and imposing order on the data (Patton, 2015). This is how I approached and analyzed this study. Other approaches commonly used in qualitative studies also aim for interpretation; however, the additional purposes they pursue did not apply to this study. A grounded theory study seeks to develop a substantial theory about the phenomenon; phenomenology aims to clarify the essence and underlying structure of the phenomenon; narrative analysis seeks to reveal the meaning of the stories people tell; ethnography

examines the interactions of individuals with one another and within a culture; and case studies, while interpretive, strive to present a holistic, in-depth description of the entire system or case (Merriam et al., 2002). The interpretive approach also aligns with my epistemological stance.

Epistemology

Fundamental beliefs that guide research actions are a worldview, paradigm, or epistemological position (Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2011; Newman & Glass, 2015). The terms refer to the researcher's general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research brought to a study (Creswell, 2014). My epistemological position is constructivism. Constructivists primarily focus on how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences, not just reporting facts. The world is not a reflection of objective reality but rather a subjective construction of it (Merriam, 2015). Table 2 illustrates six components of constructivism.

Table 2

Constructivism

Item	Description
Subjectivity	The researcher is a subjective data interpreter, not an objective observer. Their experiences, values, and beliefs shape their understanding of the study.
Interpretation	Researchers interpret the meanings participants give to their experiences.
Contextualism	Social, cultural, and historical contexts shape understanding.
Participatory	Participants are co-researchers and are active agents in the research process.
Flexibility	Methods can be adapted to fit the research topic and the needs of the participants.
Qualitative	Interviews, observations, and other methods provide in-depth exploration of participants' experiences.

Note: Adapted from Merriam, S. B. (2015). *Qualitative research: Designing, implementing, and publishing a study*.

As Charmaz (2017) noted, constructivism has limitations, as it is subjective, and my experiences and biases may shape the interpretation of this data. While seeking reflexivity, I addressed my assumptions, prejudices, and influences head-on. My task was to understand how academic advisors of exploratory students constructed reality and gave meaning to their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Language is a powerful instrument for shaping understanding (Gergen et al., 1996). I encouraged advisors skilled at using words to do so in the recollections of how they navigated the pandemic. I was non-judgmental and respected diverse views, which built trust and encouraged dialogue. The result of this interpretive-constructivist approach was an informative, robust study. So, while constructivism has limitations, insights into what was happening in the lives of AAES during the pandemic were sought and found. Overall, the constructivist paradigm offers a unique perspective on research, emphasizing the importance of subjective interpretation and contextual understanding.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide a perspective for examining a topic and help ground the research (Grant & Osanloo, 2015). Each new research endeavor can, in turn, make a theoretical contribution to how existing theories, models, or concepts apply in different contexts (Tracy, 2010). Schlossberg's Transition Model acted as the theoretical framework for this study.

Schlossberg's Transition Model

I used Schlossberg's Transition Model (STM) to help analyze how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their programs. The model, designed to analyze human adaptation to change, begins by describing three types of life events:

- *Anticipated* - major life events we expect, such as graduating from high school, marrying, becoming a parent, starting a job, and retiring.
- *Unanticipated* - disruptive events that occur unexpectedly, such as major surgery, a severe car accident, a family move to a new city, or job loss.
- *Nonevents* - events that fail to occur, such as not getting married, not receiving an expected promotion, or not being able to retire financially.

The COVID-19 pandemic was unanticipated and was disruptive. This study explores how AAES responded to the event, the adjustments made, and the lasting effects. STM's four factors, known as the 4Ss, are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Schlossberg's 4S Factors

Item	Description
Situation	What else is going on at the time of the event? Are there other stressors?
Self	Optimistic, resilient, and able to deal with ambiguity? Or fretful, fearful?
Support	Helps to absorb the event's impact and one's sense of well-being.
Strategies	How can the situation be changed or the problem be reframed?

Note: Adapted from Schlossberg, N. K. (2011). *The Challenge of Change: The Transition Model and its Applications*.

My Role as The Researcher

As the researcher in this qualitative study, my primary role was to serve as the instrument for collecting and analyzing data. Collecting and analyzing data seems ideal for understanding humans who can be immediately responsive and adaptive (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). However, as researchers, we have shortcomings and biases that might impact qualitative research, as none of us are omniscient or neutral observers. With my background as an exploratory student and as an academic advisor, there was a heightened possibility of bias. Therefore, as Peshkin (1988) suggested, rather than trying to eliminate biases or subjectivities, I identified them and explored how those biases interacted with the collection and interpretation of data. This chapter discusses reflexivity and self-examination of my role as a researcher. While acknowledging reflexivity, I also acknowledge that, as a constructivist, I actively engaged with the interviewees to understand their unique perspectives and interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic's effects. We co-constructed knowledge through interaction and open-ended questions that allowed for rich descriptions. I let the conversation flow, leading to paths I could not have planned for.

Data Generation

Data generation, also known as data collection, refers to the process of actively creating and collecting data through various methods. A qualitative study collects non-numerical data, such as audio or video recordings, to gain a deeper understanding of people's experiences, perceptions, and motivations rather than measuring quantities. Generating data in qualitative studies aims to explore the “why” and “how” behind phenomena through rich descriptive data.

In this qualitative study, the population samples are purposefully selected rather than randomly chosen to ensure that the sample includes participants from whom the most could be learned (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverman, 2005; Stake, 1995). Using purposeful selection, I identified my population by identifying four-year universities with exploratory studies units and academic advisors who assisted students in exploring their majors at the school. The schools that met the criteria were identified through published materials and a systematic online search conducted in each of the 50 United States.

Participant Recruitment

There were 68 colleges and universities that met the criteria of having academic advisors in an Exploratory Studies division at four-year institutions. I created an Excel spreadsheet with the population sample and searched each institution's Exploratory Studies website to obtain email information for their academic advisors. At three colleges, I was unable to access email information for the advisors because it was restricted to students and staff members of that institution. At four other colleges, individual advisors' email addresses were not provided, but a general exploratory advising email address was. I populated the spreadsheet with the 68 higher education institutions, the 178 email addresses, and additional notes.

I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Valdosta State University on April 17, 2024 (see Appendix A) and proceeded with recruitment for my study. I sent customized emails (see Appendix B) to potential participants, which included the advisor's name, the institution's name, a description of the research study, and details about the interview process. The IRB statement was included at the end of

each email as required. Emails were sent to 178 AAES over 18 weeks. If the exploratory studies unit had more than one academic advisor, the emails were delivered simultaneously to each advisor. I also sent invitations to the general email addresses provided when no academic advisor email was available, but I did not receive responses from those. To participate, the advisor initiated the interview process by selecting a 60-minute time block to schedule the first of two recorded interviews on Zoom or Microsoft Teams using the link provided in the email. I utilized Doodle.com as my scheduling software and tracked the responses to my invitation on an Excel spreadsheet. The data were collected over a nine-month period, from May 2024 to February 2025.

The Participants

Fifteen AAES from four-year higher education institutions agreed to participate. Every academic advisor who agreed to the first interview completed the second interview. Table 4 lists the 15 participants with their pseudonyms, years of experience, the average number of students they advise, and other relevant information.

Table 4

Participants

Name	Gender	Years Advising[1]	# of Advisees	Student Population	Time Zone
Adelynn	Female	4 - 6	80 - 100	4,000 – 14,000	Eastern
Chabar	Male	8 - 10	50 - 70	7,000 – 17,000	Mountain
Darla	Female	10 - 12	100 - 120	30,000 – 40,000	Central
Eddington	Male	5 - 7	80 - 100	25,000 – 35,000	Eastern
Florinett	Female	8 - 10	40 - 50	4,000 – 14,000	Central
Holmes	Male	10 - 12	230 - 250	30,000 – 40,000	Pacific
Inga	Female	12 -14	80 - 100	30,000 – 40,000	Eastern

Jaquita	Female	4 - 6	280 - 300	15,000 – 25,000	Mountain
Lavarin	Male	5 - 7	30 - 50	20,000 – 30,000	Eastern
Louna	Female	6 - 8	100 - 120	30,000 – 40,000	Pacific
Marcyn	Female	12 - 14	50 - 70	5,000 – 15,000	Central
Prelow	Male	7 - 9	230 - 250	30,000 – 40,000	Eastern
Ruth Mae	Female	14 - 16	100 - 120	30,000 – 40,000	Eastern
Shaylan	Female	10 - 12	80 - 100	25,000 – 35,000	Mountain
Winstone	Male	12 - 14	50 - 70	30,000 – 40,000	Central

[1] *Number of years advising in exploratory studies.*

Additional Participant's Information

On average, the participants had eight years of experience advising exploratory students and advised 116 students each academic year. Of the 15 participants, 11 also taught exploratory classes; at least one was classified as a faculty member. More than half of the participants had supervisory responsibilities. Fourteen advisors held advanced degrees and three held doctorate degrees. There are no specific undergraduate degrees in academic advising; it is on-the-job training. Therefore, the participants in this study have diverse educational backgrounds in Arts, Business, Counseling, Education, Exercise Science, Humanities, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Student Affairs, and Technology. One participant sought to advise exploratory students after being an exploratory student. The others serendipitously became AAES. Many had fascinating journeys to their current role advising exploratory students. After Adelynn described her circuitous path to the career she loves, she jokingly asked, "Who one day says I can't wait to advise undecided students? I didn't even know that exploratory programs were a thing."

AAES Job Descriptions

The descriptions of their advising responsibilities are summarized in the following

comments. Eddington: “I've been through the exploring process. My goal is to help students now go through that process with more intentionality and understand the things that they can do in the world.” Several AAES made a point of emphasizing how important it was for them to make students feel inclusive. Marcyn was one. She described her role by saying, “First and foremost, one of the responsibilities is just to help them understand that it's okay to be undeclared or undecided. There is a path for them, and if we can just work together, we can find that path,” Darla echoed those sentiments about it being okay to be exploratory, and she included, “I would describe my advising as primarily relationship-building because I always end every one of my appointments with new students, telling them ‘I'm your go-to.’”

In Holmes’ comments about his advising responsibilities, he also described his advisees: “I love advising this population. I joke that I have a short attention span, so I like the variety. I like the engagement with students who have a variety of interests and are on distinctive paths related to those interests.” Many academic advisors are counselors in some ways. Florinett described her role: “I would say I'm kind of a counsel, a career counselor. Easing their stresses and asking what their interests are, then guiding them into some majors.” Prelow’s encompassing comments were represented, too: “Building rapport with the students, seeing them as individual people, supplying them with connections to resources and other things around campus. Help them to build self-efficacy to get to a sense of self-actualization as people and as scholars.”

Institutional Characteristics

The participants represented 12 colleges and universities. Characteristics of their institutions are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5

Institutional Characteristics

Number of Academic Advisors in Their Exploratory Unit	
One - Three	3
Four - Six	5
Seven or more	4

Type of College or University	
Public	3
Public Land Grant	7
Private	2

Total Undergraduate Enrollment	
Less than 10,000	3
10,000 – 20,000	1
20,001 – 30,000	1
30,001 – 40,000	6
40,001 or more	1

Annual Undergraduate Tuition[1] in $	
Less than 25,000	3
25,001 – 35,000	4
35,001 – 45,000	3
More than 45,000	2

Note: [1] Out-of-state tuition rates, where applicable.

Interviewing the 15 participants generated detailed descriptions of their experiences navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section describes the structure of the interviews, my role, and the interview questions.

Interviews

The purpose of interviews is to gain information from the interviewee's perspective. An interview transmits and co-constructs knowledge from the direct interactions between the researcher and the participant (Kvale, 2008). Interviews enable participants and researchers to build knowledge together (Kvale, 2008; Seidman, 2013). As all human communication is narrative, we are storytellers conveying knowledge through language and stories (Fisher, 1984; Seidman, 2013).

My Role as The Interviewer

As the primary data collection instrument in this interpretive study, I was responsible for applying the study's directions, guiding the topics of conversation, and interjecting probing questions to extract as much knowledge as possible from the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Understanding comes through conversation; consequently, I designed research questions to stimulate conversation and gather participants' perspectives.

Interview Questions

The interview questions designed for this study were related directly to research questions RQ1-RQ4 and were applied to more than one RQ.

RQ1: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the delivery of academic advisement for exploratory students? Interview questions 1, 2, 3, 8, 9.

RQ2: What strategies to advise exploratory students were changed or created due

to the COVID-19 pandemic? Interview questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12.

RQ3: What support was instrumental to academic advisors of exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic? Interview questions 3, 5, 7, 9, 10.

RQ4: How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect academic advisors of exploratory students? Interview questions 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Interview Format

Two one-hour interviews were conducted with each AAES to capture their experiences as they navigated uncharted waters during the COVID-19 global pandemic. All the interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. After practicing my interview with a former academic advisor to surmise how long the interviews would last, I determined that two 60-minute interviews per participant would be sufficient to cover my questions and allow for additional information. Most qualitative interviews aim to stay around an hour long to maintain participant engagement and avoid overly lengthy data analysis (Patton, 2014). The total for both interviews was 106 minutes on average per participant, so allotting 120 minutes for two interviews was a good fit.

I established a rapport from the outset to ensure the academic advisor felt comfortable sharing personal perspectives. I aimed to create an atmosphere where they could openly discuss their experiences and reflect on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. I removed as many demands from the research situation as possible and replaced them with an association of empathy, understanding, and trust (Wertz, 1984). I used open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews, listened actively, allowed participants time to express their views, probed further when necessary, and encouraged

interviewees to elaborate on their recollections (Merriam, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The audio and video were recorded on Otter.ai and Zoom Cloud. I documented and labeled the interviews as they occurred and backed up the data.

The interview was not an interrogation aimed at substantiating my hunches. Open-ended questions provided broad parameters, allowing interviewees to answer the question in their own words (Roulston, 2022). I allowed the interview to flow in the participant's direction and tried to tolerate silence to encourage the participant to elaborate. I used the benefit of qualitative interviewing techniques by modifying questions to match the participant's knowledge, experience, or comfort level (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Interviews in a qualitative study should continue until redundancy in the data is achieved, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). However, the interviews ended in this study when I had no more volunteer participants.

Interview Guide

An interview guide enhances the comprehensiveness of the data collection process by outlining steps and questions for an interview (Patton, 2015). In this interpretive inquiry, my interview guide (see Appendix C) served as a framework for collecting information and maximizing the data gathered from AAES as they shared their experiences during the pandemic. The interview guide ensured consistency in the opening and closing, from logging onto the virtual platform early and reading my Informed Consent Statement to reminding participants about building rapport and expressing gratitude. However, the order and phrasing of questions varied, and additional questions emerged from the advisors' responses, as Byrne (2004) predicted. The participants

provided broader, deeper, and richer descriptions of their experiences than I had anticipated based on the questions I prepared in advance.

Conducting The Interviews

I tested my audio and video system 15 minutes before each interview and checked for any last-minute schedule changes from the participant. When the advisor joined the Zoom or Microsoft Teams call (Zoom was used for approximately 90% of the interviews), I began our conversation with a greeting and a hearty thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. I immediately began to build rapport with the participants by asking how they were doing, confirming that it was still a good time to meet, and checking on the progress of their academic term. With many weather disturbances occurring in the U.S. during my interviews, we frequently discussed the weather. I continually thanked them for participating. Before starting the interview, I read my Informed Consent Statement (see Appendix D) stating that:

1. Participation is voluntary; no compensation or incentives are provided.
2. The interview was recorded with their consent.
3. Aliases will be used to protect anonymity.
4. The participants can review their interview transcript and the results.

The interviews began with questions about their AAES experience to ensure they met the study's criteria, as recommended by Utsey et al. (2005). I then moved on to broad questions about them personally, followed by more specific inquiries regarding their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was courteous, respectful of their time, and encouraged them to speak openly. During the interview, situations arose that required sensitivity and tact. As Suzuki et al. (2014) explained, discussing experiences can evoke

powerful emotions, such as sadness, shame, and anger. The well-being of my participants was always my top priority, and I remained mindful of the importance of being compassionate while adhering to my role (Ary et al., 2019; Patton, 2015). In moments of emotional intensity, the safety and support of academic advisors were always at the forefront of my mind. However, I did not assume the therapist's role, as Suzuki et al. (2014) cautioned. I concluded each interview by reminding the participants that they would receive a transcript of our conversation and could decide whether they wished to exclude specific material.

At the end of each interview, I thanked the participant for their time and discussed the content of the second interview. I let them know if there were any remaining questions. I asked them to think about the topic, and we would discuss anything they wanted to talk about in the second interview. To stimulate that process, I gave them a question to consider and for us to discuss during the second interview. I scheduled a second interview with them at the end of the first interview, if possible. Otherwise, I immediately sent them a scheduling link on Doodle.com with my availability for a second interview after the first interview. Eighty percent of the second interviews occurred within three weeks of the first one. After each interview, I sent a thank-you email to the participant and informed the advisor that I appreciated their time and insights. Without participants, I could not have done this research.

As an interviewer, there are no guarantees of acceptance from the interviewees, and building trust is challenging. As Johnson-Bailey (1999) wrote, differences or similarities in age, gender, and race could influence the flow and depth of the interview. Those differences are sometimes conspicuous and, at other times, an inconspicuous

gateway or barrier to conversational dialogues. As a baby boomer African American woman, I am aware that age, gender, and race affect communication, and the differences can be binding or a barrier. I am also aware that genuineness is a factor in effective communication. I was genuinely myself in the interviews and created an environment, albeit virtual, where the participants could also be themselves. Doing that created mutual acceptance and encouraged free-flowing dialogue.

The interviewing phase of qualitative research is dynamic and ever-changing (Seidman, 2013). No two situations or circumstances are alike; each interview is a unique unit of work. I used open-ended, minimally structured interview questions to generate data, foster an atmosphere of trust and respectful concern for participants, and illuminate our interest in the phenomenon. Patton (2015) noted that active listening is a valuable skill for researchers. I developed those skills early in my career, which served me well during these interviews. A lifelong friend recently remarked that my ability to engage others is “off the charts.” Perhaps that is because I believe we are all in this together.

Ethics

Conducting qualitative research comes with significant ethical responsibilities. Ethics refers to the moral principles that guide researchers in conducting studies that collect rich, detailed data about individuals' experiences, perspectives, and behaviors (Bhandari, 2024). Ethical considerations ensure that participants are treated with respect, privacy, and autonomy by prioritizing informed consent, confidentiality, mitigation of potential harm, and the responsible reporting of findings. Ethics refers to acting with integrity and prioritizing the well-being of participants throughout the research process

(Ary et al., 2019). This ensures that the research process respects participants' rights, dignity, and well-being (Ary et al., 2019; Creswell, 2014; Roulston, 2022).

This investigation adhered to ethical considerations. *Informed consent***:** I read the Informed Consent Statement (see Appendix D) before the interviews, checked for understanding, and emailed a copy to the participant. The Informed Consent explained the research purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits to participants, and informed them that they could freely participate or withdraw from the study at any time. *Confidentiality***:** I protected the participants' identities by anonymizing data, using pseudonyms in the results, and securely storing information. *Privacy***:** I respected the participants' boundaries and did not collect unnecessary information such as age, race, or marital status. *Voluntary participation*: I ensured participants were not coerced into participating and could withdraw at any time. *Potential for harm*: I identified and mitigated potential risks to participants related to emotionally charged topics surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. While not acting as a therapist, I remained calm during emotional conversations and refrained from interrupting the participant. *Data integrity***:** I accurately represented participant experiences and did not manipulate data.

Data Analysis

After the initial interview with AAES, I took notes on my impressions and what stood out to me during the interview. An additional interview question arose from the first interview when the academic advisor mentioned what they would like to see happen magically. I then added a “magic wand” question to the end of the first interview with future participants and arranged for it to be discussed in the second interview. Through the subsequent four interviews, I made notes immediately afterward, with two exceptions when I had to decompress first. It did not feel like I was an analyst. However, later in the

data analysis phases, I realized that taking notes about my thoughts, reflecting on the participants' comments, and considering the 4Ss were crucial steps in analyzing the data and establishing credibility in my results.

I used the transcription service provided by my audio-video recording software, Otter.ai, to edit the interview data. I spent hours on each transcript to make it readable and comprehensible. I listened to the recordings while checking for incorrect speaker labels (there were several), misheard words (more than I expected), punctuation (it matters where a period and comma are placed), and misspellings (not too bad). I also removed filler words, such as “you know” and “um,” for clarity. In two instances, Otter.ai did not transcribe the audio portions of the interviews well, and I reconstructed the dialog from Otter.ai and Zoom video recordings.

For confidentiality, I removed the names of academic advisors and institutions from the transcription. I highlighted any areas that were not transcribable, added line numbers for easier reference, and sent the edited transcription to the participants for approval. Sending the transcript to the interviewee for verification, also known as a respondent or member check, is crucial to ensure that the transcript accurately represents the interviewee's words. As I acknowledge my biases, executing the member check ensures the view expressed is the interviewees' and not mine, enhancing the study's credibility (Maxwell, 2013).

With the first series of interviews, I took notes and organized the printed transcripts, but I did not delve too deeply into the themes. However, within a couple of weeks, I had enough data to begin the thematic process for the data analysis phase. I entered the combined transcript information from each participant's first and second

interviews into Microsoft Excel. Using a software application to find related information helped with the data analysis. I initially listened to the recordings from Otter.ai and Zoom while transcribing them. However, listening to them again while following along with the readable transcript allowed me to hear or see what was more subtle but significant, especially now that I had the insights of other participants. During this familiarization phase, I also took the time to reflect on my emotional response to the data.

In designing this study, I purposefully aligned the interview questions with my research purpose, research questions, epistemology, and theoretical framework. As a starting point to analyze the data, I organized the responses using a priori coding around the 4S factors in Schlossberg's Transition Model (STM). Priori coding is a structured approach to qualitative data analysis that applies established codes based on existing knowledge, literature, or theoretical frameworks rather than deriving them from the data (Stuckey, 2015). A priori coding involves defining codes before analyzing the data using established theories or frameworks to guide the analysis. To understand how the AAES navigated the pandemic and its impact on their procedures, I established a priori code based on the four broad STM factors that help analyze transition: *Situation* includes timing, duration, and other concurrent events. *Strategies* are the tools, resources, and designs to cope with the changes from the event. *Support* refers to the people, organizations, or institutions that help with the event. *Self* is the person experiencing the event.

As I immersed myself in the data, I used the printed transcripts to code and make a visual hub diagram of the coded data. With each subsequent interview, I updated the Excel spreadsheet, added items to the existing hubs, or created a new one. By applying a

priori coding of the 4Ss and adding thematic analysis. I could see in the visuals that the advisors described the situations, strategies, support, and self during different times of the pandemic. I needed to account for them at the beginning of the pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. The different periods became my categories, and the 4S factors became themes. The narratives of the AAES had a series of subthemes that spanned more than one factor (a priori code) and outside of them.

I began an abductive reasoning approach to the data. Abductive reasoning is a type of logical inference where you start with an observation and then seek the simplest and most likely explanation (Magnani, 2004). Abductive reasoning refers to judging what explanation underlies a group of facts or observations; it aims to ascertain which explanations are best or most plausible (Shank, 1998). While familiarizing myself with the data set, I employed a priori coding using situation, strategy, support, and self as themes. I used an open-ended coding process to analyze the data thematically. I reviewed and revised those themes before naming the final ones, as recommended by Terry and Hayfield (2021).

Credibility

Readers who interpret a written work want confidence in what the researcher has reported. Determining whether the process is credible involves the researcher demonstrating that data analysis has been conducted precisely, consistently, and exhaustively by disclosing the analysis methods in detail (Stahl & King, 2020). Pure intentions in conducting research do not guarantee trustworthy findings. For research to have merit, it must be believable and truthful (Robson & McCartan, 2016)

The credibility of a study is determined when researchers or readers are

confronted with an experience they can recognize (Schwandt et al., 2007). Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant's views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012). Credibility is enhanced when the researcher describes their experiences as a researcher and verifies the research findings with the participants. The following describes bias and how I used data engagement, member checks, and audit trails to operationalize credibility as Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested.

Bias

An awareness of one's perspectives, values, and beliefs and how these may shape data collection is essential (Maxwell, 2013). Bias is something we are never without. It constantly influences how we interpret the world. One of my favorite professors, Dr. Gwen, described bias as not bad or wrong; it just is. Failing to address bias when conducting a qualitative study explicitly can weaken the credibility of the research. This study relates to my background as an exploratory student and academic advisor. Therefore, I must turn the inquiry inward to ensure my biases do not influence the research. We are human beings in qualitative research and want to ensure that bias does not become an obstruction. As Patton (2015) suggested, I continually monitored my biases and implemented strategies to address potential hurdles.

Creswell (2014) explained that maintaining objectivity is essential in competent inquiry. Before each interview, I reminded myself that I owed it to the research process to minimize subjectivity. Being objective while listening to and analyzing the advisors' navigation of the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging, so I continually monitored and documented my feelings during data collection and analysis (Peshkin, 1988).

Reflexivity

As a qualitative researcher and an essential part of the research process, my prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs will influence the research process. Reflexivity is a term used in research to examine and understand one's biases, assumptions, and influences on a study (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflexivity is critical for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. I engaged in this practice throughout this research. As a former academic advisor and an exploratory student, I have first-hand experience with the phenomenon I am researching. By practicing reflexivity, I strengthened the credibility of my findings by acknowledging the personal biases that could affect data generation and analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

Detailed Engagement with the Data

Engaging with qualitative data involves a process of careful examination, analysis, and interpretation to extract meaningful insights and themes. I continually reviewed interview transcripts and assigned labels and codes to the data. I explored the stories and narratives in the data to construct meaning. I used relevant quotes and settings from the research participants to clearly and concisely communicate my findings and provide context for my interpretations. I organized the data, identified recurring patterns, and ultimately told the story co-constructed by the findings during the interviews.

Member Checks

Member refers to participants in qualitative research. Member checking is a productive research technique used to verify the accuracy and credibility of the data, thereby improving the quality of the results. By sharing the data for their review, the practice helps reduce the possibility of misinterpreting or misrepresenting participants. It

allows them to verify accuracy and ensure it resonates with their experiences and is not drawn from my bias (Birt et al., 2016; Stahl & King, 2020).

For member checking, I emailed each participant a document containing the transcripts from their two interviews. I requested feedback, which allowed them to make any necessary adjustments. The only changes requested were two incorrectly transcribed words: “form” instead of “formula” and “churning” instead of “turning.” After completing the results, I emailed each participant the findings and asked for feedback to ensure I accurately reflected their views. No changes were requested from the AAES participants.

Audit Trail

An audit trail in qualitative research is a systematic record of all decisions, actions, and reflections throughout the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Stahl & King, 2020). It demonstrates the study's rigor by providing readers with a clear, transparent path to follow and evaluate. My audit trail includes notes from the initial design and my decisions regarding the interviews, coding data, and the challenges I faced. I kept detailed notes on my data generation, adaptations I made (e.g., to look into the camera more), and how the data was categorized and shared.

Summary

This chapter contained descriptions of the research method, approach, epistemology, data generation, data analysis, and strategies for ensuring credibility. An interpretive research approach is best suited for generating and analyzing the experiences of academic advisors while supporting exploratory students during a global pandemic. Constructivism is my philosophical worldview, which I apply to this study. I used open-

ended questions and minimally structured interviews to gather data. My interviewing experience and active listening skills are valuable assets for research. I conducted the data analysis carefully, consistently, and thoroughly. I acknowledged biases and the steps taken to ensure credibility: detailed engagement with the data, member checks, and an audit trail. In this interpretive study, the data were generated through interviews, the recordings were transcribed and verified by the participants, and the data were analyzed using a theoretical framework and reflexive theme analysis. The results are found in chapter IV.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

This chapter presents findings from my interpretive inquiry into how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their advising procedures. The study's four research questions (RQ1–RQ4) are connected to the STM theoretical framework.

RQ1 How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the delivery of academic advisement for exploratory students? **Situation**

RQ2 What strategies to advise exploratory students were created or changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic? **Strategy**

RQ3 What support was instrumental to academic advisors of exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic? **Support**

RQ4 How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect academic advisors of exploratory students? **Self**

Description

The length of time each advisor felt the pandemic affected their university varied; however, their responses could be grouped thematically into three phases: the onset, during, and post-pandemic. These three phases became categories. The 4S factors serve as themes, and within themes are subthemes.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic became a global health crisis. For months, the pandemic wreaked havoc on every segment of society. In Part 1, the findings from the interviews with the AAES reveal their initial experiences with the onset of the pandemic during the spring and summer terms of 2020. Part 2 begins in the fall term of 2020 and continues for several months, depending on how long the AAES felt the pandemic had impacted their institution. Part 3 contains the findings of their experiences after the pandemic. Each theme- situation, self, support, and strategy- is represented in the findings. The resulting findings provide rich, detailed descriptions of how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the three phases of the pandemic: How It Began, In the Midst of It All, and The New Normal.

Part 1 of 3 - How It Began

Like many in society, participants in this study were unaware of the severity of COVID-19 or uncertain about its implications, others were acutely aware of the potential for significant disruption, and others were somewhere in between [***Situation***].

Ambiguity

Here is a reflection from Prelow, who described himself as level-headed. “It seemed like there was this growing sense of panic in the news and just in society. And I was like, what is this? What is this all about? This seems silly that people are just freaking out.”

On the other hand, another AAES knew that the travel restrictions in Asia were an indicator of the severity of the coronavirus. They understood what that foretold about the potential landscape for his institution. Lavarin said this:

> We actually had a very strong idea of how severe COVID was going to be early on. We did some pre-planning, and we started coming up with plans. We were vehemently told absolutely not. You must be in the office. You can't do these things—almost kind of like a how dare you kind of perspective.

In another scenario, Eddington described the effort he was involved in to plan for any impending changes caused by health concerns from the pandemic:

> My colleague and I started to hear more and more about what was going on. We sat down as a leadership team and asked how we would function if we had to transition theoretically. It was a whole day of thinking through logistics. But I think the overriding thing was not knowing and trying to get an education about how to support services in different formats.

Campus Closings

In mid-March 2020, concerns grew as more information became available about the proliferation of the coronavirus. Actions were being taken to mitigate its spread. In response to the situation, many colleges decided to have their staff and faculty work remotely, except for essential personnel.

For some, the disruption from the coronavirus occurred during Spring Break week. Inga was heading to her office when she heard the news. She described how she was blindsided. “I heard on the radio they're going to extend spring break. And I was like, huh, why am I hearing about this on the radio? I should know this. I work there.”

The expectation was that it would not be too long, and regular campus operations would resume quickly. However, shelter-in-place orders were imposed by local and state

governments to protect the health and safety of their communities. Florinett, an AAES advisor and teacher, described the experience:

> We were on spring break when it started. All the news started coming out. They decided midweek that we would have an extra couple of weeks off. 'Oh, just two more weeks, and we'll be back on campus,' they said. We did not return that semester.

In the middle of spring break week, Winstone's university asked staff to work from home as a precaution:

> So, it started, like, two days, and then it was, we're going to delay return from spring break for students for two days. And then it became we're going to delay returning from spring break for a week. Of course, it eventually moved to no one returning to campus.

Eddington recalled, "They closed campus, and so we got, like, 24 hours' notice that we were asked to come in on staggered schedules to grab anything we could from our offices and then set up at home."

Jaquita, who was on vacation, described her experience after learning that her university was closing:

> On Friday, we were told that we were going to be working remotely for a while and to take our computers home with us. And then the world shut down that Saturday and Sunday. I thought it was going to be like two weeks to a month. I went in, got my computer, and brought it home. Turned into two years of totally remote work.

As schools attempted to close, students remained in on-campus residential housing. Darla described how her exploratory studies unit assisted students who were in campus housing and had COVID-19:

> We made sure they were safe and knew we were still available to them. The university had set up temporary housing for anyone who tested positive for COVID, and we were that go-between. The student would email and say, I tested positive, and they've come and moved me over here. We made sure the students who were still on campus were being taken care of.

In another scenario, Chabar reported that his university did not officially close or require its staff to work remotely:

> We moved all our classes online for the remainder of that spring semester, but we never mandated that employees work from home. It was around campus; if you want to do this, you're welcome to do it. I came to my office the whole time. I closed my door, and then I met with folks on Zoom.

As the long-term impact of the coronavirus seemed imminent, questions arose. What would working remotely look like? How do we advise students remotely?

Pivoting

The subtheme of pivoting centers on the need for immediate adjustments to maintain operations. The academic advisors commented on transitioning to online advising, teaching, and preparing for summer orientation [***Strategy***].

Eddington, who advises and teaches, said:

> We teach a first-year transition course. So, how do we advise online? How do we also teach online? These are two separate things. We were trying to learn all of it at the same time, so it was very chaotic. We were really an office that did almost nothing virtually. We had paper files up until 2020.

For many institutions and AAES, the commitment to assist students in a guided and intentional exploration includes classes specifically designed for them. The classes are often required, the content is sequential, and guest speakers from different departments present their programs. As students have a limit on how long they can remain exploratory before declaring a major, the classes are an efficient use of time to gain exposure to different fields.

Darla, whose university has a large exploratory student base, expressed her determination to continue offering classes in her unit:

> One of the requirements of being in our Exploratory Studies Program is an academic and career planning course that we teach. Well, we never offered that online. Okay, what are we going to do? We have to make a plan because we're going to keep this class going.

Lavarin, who had tried to make plans with his HEI before the virus struck, described what transpired. “They kept saying we'll come back in a few weeks. And then it became quite evident we had to plan for summer orientation virtually. We had to start thinking about fall virtually.”

Chabar explained his experiences during the pivot phase as he was involved with other leaders to try to find solutions:

> They made the decision that students weren't coming back after spring break. That decision was made quickly, and so everything was moving online. Imagine all that happening in a week. We were having quite a few meetings about how the heck are we going to support these students. How are we going to help accommodate students who may not have the technology and Internet access that they need?

Several advisors expressed the need for a quick pivot. Chabar continued with a description of his quick pivot, but the content of the advising sessions had changed:

> After spring break is a heavy time for individual advising meetings. Those were via Zoom. And it was more talking about how they were coping with the current term rather than planning for subsequent terms as it normally would be.

Winstone represented a different approach to the pandemic when he described this about his exploratory unit for the balance of the Spring term and the next 17 months:

> Everybody was just waiting to see what was going on. So we were fairly quiet, I would say, for most of the rest of the semester, not dead by any means but quiet. We transitioned to online and remained online exclusively for the spring and all of summer. And for Fall 2020 and Spring 2021. We didn't return to the office, in person, for services of any kind until August 2021.

Pivoting to an online platform for instruction or advising was not a primary concern for another school. Florinett described her institution's situation at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> It was always assumed we would get back to being in person. And so, we weren't really worried about online. We had to adapt a little bit over that first semester and over the summer, but then we were able to get right back on campus. And so, the mentality was not to stretch ourselves and create more online experiences; it was to go right back to our brick-and-mortar campus.

Personally

For the academic advisors in this study, regardless of whether they were single, single parents, married without children, or married with children, the onset of the pandemic and the transition to working from home presented challenges (***Self***).

Ruth Mae, an experienced advisor at a large institution, resisted leaving the office at the outset of the pandemic:

> I remember feeling very nervous about transitioning from in-person to remote. I didn't know that I could be a productive person working from home. I'm going to get distracted. I'm going to find other things to do. So, that was my initial thought.

Louna resisted leaving, too. “I really didn't want to leave the office. I was really resistant—the last one to leave campus.” Inga, married with school-aged children, described her experiences. Her family was now home, with their workplaces and schools closed. “I don't think I had a work laptop prior to that. So, getting the equipment, trying to figure out how do you work from home. I had to get new, higher-speed internet.”

The pandemic created anxiety for some AAES. Adelynn, a leader in her exploratory studies unit, was candid about her status:

> How did I cope? Not well. I didn't leave the house, truly, for months. I was in a state of anxiety, 24/7. I think that our drinking increased because we were bored. My husband sometimes left the house, but then I would sanitize everything. Let's go, wipe the boxes off. Let's wipe everything down. All I think about when I think of COVID-19 personally is the anxiety.

Students

Strategies were implemented or modified during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance student well-being and relieve student concerns about grades. Getting them through the spring term was critical [***Situation, Strategy***].

Marcyn, who advises and leads her unit, reported on how they handled the crisis at her university and the concern for students:

> We said, head home for spring break, and then don't come back to campus after spring break. Our biggest concern was the well-being of our students. So, we did a lot of call campaigns to see how they were doing, just a check-in call. Really wasn't about advising or anything specific. We were just calling to say, you know, this is tough. We hope to see you back on campus soon.

How grades were handled when the coronavirus interrupted in-person classes was paramount for several advisors. Chabar reported, “One adjustment that we made for our students was to allow them to declare any class satisfactory or unsatisfactory. There would be no grade point average bearing on those course results. And that was up to the student.”

Shaylan was also concerned about the students' grades, so she decided to use her voice to advocate for a temporary fix:

> No one knew what was going on and how to proceed correctly or fairly. Our students were really suffering. We started a campaign that we took to the provost asking the [Spring] semester to be graded, pass-fail, or satisfactory-unsatisfactory. For me, that was just one way to regain some control of what was happening to all of us.

Inga expressed concerns about how she would handle an emotional situation with a student as she moved to a virtual advising platform. If she were advising in person, she would shut her office door and offer a tissue. What can she do when they are virtual, she wondered? "How do I comfort them on Zoom?"

Leadership

University leadership played a key role in shaping the academic advisors' perceptions of how the pandemic was handled [***Support***]. Leadership is a sub-theme in all three categories.

Many of the advisors felt their institution was doing the best it could. Louna perceived her HEI as doing everything possible to keep the community safe:

> I felt a lot of trust in whatever they were saying. I would get on board. They said they were working with the local hospitals and the health authorities. They had a whole COVID website that they put up with updates. And so, I had a lot of confidence in the university guiding me through the pandemic at the beginning.

Jaquita said, “For a university where things take years to change, I was really impressed with how quickly we were able to pivot on our heels.” Another AAES, Adelynn, added, “I think we did a good job of pivoting for a school that did not really have much of an online infrastructure previously.

Summer Orientation

Academic advising was a one-on-one, in-person interaction. Advisors were familiar with video conferencing but had not previously utilized applications like Microsoft Teams or Zoom to advise students. The advisors spoke about pivoting the advising and teaching components for the spring 2020 term but also had to prepare for an active summer orientation season [***Situation, Strategy***].

Prelow described what was going on at his HEI as the pandemic affected his unit’s summer orientation plans:

> The orientation season for advising, of course, is the summer. It's a big part of what we do. It's like the busiest part of the year, and so the whole institution is trying to navigate how do we do this completely from our computers at home.

Holmes recalled collaborating with team members about summer orientation. “I just remember countless hours of strategizing and planning, trying to figure out how to make all that work. So those are my very palpable memories of March 2020.”

After a chaotic Spring semester trying to advise and teach virtually, Chabar described summer orientation like this:

> Prior to the pandemic, we did a pretty classic June New Student Orientation. Students would come to campus for two days. We couldn’t do

> that, so advisors spent about an hour with a new student one-on-one via Zoom. Sharing screens, orienting them to the software they need, and having them register for their fall classes. So that was cool because it really created a better relationship. It's ironic that the pandemic created this thing that provided a more meaningful and robust relationship development between the advisor and the student, but it did. Previously, it was super stressful for the student.

Louna's exploratory unit completely revamped its summer orientation plans, which were typically held in person but had to be conducted virtually due to the pandemic. She described her experience:

> Honestly, it was one of the best summers of my life. I really, really enjoyed it. In summer orientation, it used to be like 10 minutes fast. Let's help them get registered and just keep churning through. But with the pandemic, we switched to an hour-long one-on-one [virtual] meeting. And so, I was having a great time, and I felt like my time was actually well balanced.

The AAES felt the pandemic influenced their campus anywhere from a year and a half to more than three years. Whether it was the shorter or longer range of time that the campus operations were disrupted, all agreed that routines had changed. Part 2 begins with the Fall 2020 term. As with Part 1, this phase is analyzed around the themes of situations, strategies, support, and self. This phase had the most subthemes to be analyzed, and the advisors gave rich, descriptive responses about their experiences with the new normal.

Part 2 of 3 - In the Midst of It All

Some of the institutions where AAES advised brought students back to campus in Fall 2020, the first time since mid-March. Several advisors mentioned the significance of students returning.

Reopening

With the virus still spreading and the social nature of a residential college campus, COVID cases were reported for several terms at some institutions. Concerns about the health and safety of students, staff, and faculty were expressed [***Situation***].

Florinett's description of her experiences with students returning to their campus was similar to others:

> It would get scary when we had hundreds of students with COVID on campus. We had to segment our dorms and really try to figure out, is this the healthiest way for us all to be here or not? So that first semester back was pretty scary. They would stay in a room by themselves, and we would deliver food to them and things like that. And we could deliver homework and things they needed. So, it was a pretty good system.

Adelynn, who initially had anxiety about the outbreak of the coronavirus, described the return to her institution. "We finally came back to class on a hybrid-type schedule in the fall. But students were like taking a break. They weren't sure what college was going to look like for them. It was a very strange time."

Classes for exploratory students resumed, too. Darla, who had moved her classes online in the spring term, discussed the return to in-person classes for her exploratory students:

> We all came back and offered our classes in person. The student feedback is amazing because some of those students are graduating now, saying I remember yours was my favorite class because it was the only one I actually got to go to and see other students since so many classes were totally online.

For institutions that did not have students return in person, a challenge for their exploratory students became evident quickly. Chabar noted this:

> So we really preach to exploratory studies students the value of experiential learning and experience-based decision-making. You think you like this thing? Go do it and find out. So that was really stunted, right? Their ability to have conversations, like, 'Hey, you think you like microbiology? Here's a faculty member. I want you to go and talk to them. I want you to see if you can tour their lab.' Stuff like that couldn't happen. That really stunted the experiential learning opportunities for these students.

Winstone commented about the transition to online in his exploratory studies area and his staff:

> I felt like we were able to not feel such a high level of stress in the pandemic. I felt like our services transitioned pretty easily online. Once it was more, are the people comfortable? The actual logistics of it weren't that complicated. It was more about how to get staff to not sort of panic and say none of this is meaningful if I can't sit with them.

At Adelynn's university and some others, the online conversion was still a work in progress:

> We were building the plane as we were flying it. I don't know if anyone had great answers for how to make a Zoom classroom really engaging. People had ideas, and we tried things, but that was really hard. I don't ever want to do it again on a regular basis if I don't have to.

Advising Students

Several advisors commented on how they adapted to advising students virtually [***Strategies***]. Some provided very detailed descriptions, such as Eddington, regarding their first full-term advising experience in a virtual setting:

> It's harder to advise online. It's not the same. Like, I think some people thought this is going to be easy because I'm just going to do what I normally do. But I sit here, and as much as I'm listening to them, I'm watching what they're doing. Like, what are they doing with their hands? Are they taking notes? I was not one of those people who required them to have their camera on, but if they didn't have it on, I listened to the words they were saying more to try to figure out if there was something they're not saying.

Ruth Mae, who was reluctant to work remotely when the pandemic first hit in mid-March, had this to say, and others agreed:

> I found that I'm better able to walk students through things. So, with in-person appointments, maybe a student might bring their device with them. But now that you know they're on a device, right? And so, share your

screen with me. Let me see what you're seeing. Let's walk through this together. I found that to be very helpful. I also use the Zoom chat. Okay, here's the link to a page. Now I know they have it with them in real-time.

Some of the AAES spoke about the mental health aspect of their jobs as they continually checked on the well-being of their students. Eddington summarized it like this:

> I had never filled out as many mental health reports as I did the first semester we were back. You felt there was a sense of uneasiness with that return. You're even more so doing the mental health piece. 'How are you doing as a person? I want to talk about your classes, but more than anything, this is kind of a wild time right now. How are you as a person?' That's the question I would start with because that often gave me a sense of how they were

Florinett's school returned to in-person advising. She spoke about the holistic side of advising students during the pandemic than the academic side:

> I've always known that the more chaotic, the calmer I get. And so, I felt like I could calm our students down. When I could feel that they were getting stressed or worried. But yeah, it was an interesting situation because no one has ever gone through a pandemic like this. And so, helping 18-19-year-olds through it was a unique experience. I learned that I can remain calm and focus on the positives.

Louna shared an experience about a Student of Color who had been successful remotely but felt different once she arrived on campus:

> I work at a predominantly white institution, and I had a student who was in my remote class and my advisee. When she came to campus, she told me she had a different sense of the culture of the campus being there in person. 'Oh, it's like a lot whiter, and I don't feel like I belong. I didn't notice that when I was in the Zoom classes. I felt comfortable. I felt like I was showing up as myself and supported.'

Leadership

Some universities resumed in-person activities in the Fall 2020 term, while others continued remote operations [***Support***]. Florinett spoke of the administration at her university after they returned to in-person classes:

> You know, they're just trying to scramble and figure out what to do, and sometimes things would change at the last minute. So, I think it probably wasn't very different than every other university. But, you know, our leadership was pretty good. We had a section of a dorm that we put the sick students in, and they would stay in a room by themselves, and we would deliver food to them and things like that. And if we could deliver homework and things they needed. So, it was a pretty good system.

Jaquita had this to report about leadership at her university, where there were daily updates through websites:

> The Board of Regents was really taking the lead. Communicating, doing town halls, and creating a COVID-19 dashboard to track how many people were tested and how many people were testing positive. We instituted mandatory saliva tests, and we were doing wastewater tests.

Louna, who was all in with her leadership in higher education before the pandemic, had this to say about her feelings during the pandemic:

> The one constant in my life is I've always been passionate about education. But that was the first time I was like maybe higher education is not a good thing. Maybe it is harming people. Maybe it is upholding the status quo that is problematic. And so yeah, during the pandemic, I was pretty radicalized.

Colleagues

Some advisors mentioned the camaraderie they shared with their colleagues during the pandemic [***Support***]. Florinett made a point to stress that she felt closer to her coworkers than she may have in the past:

> I felt pretty blessed to be on a campus where we could support each other, be lenient toward each other, and give each other time off if we needed it. So, yeah, it was rough. I feel like I benefited a lot from it, too.

Jaquita was impressed by how quickly her HEI pivoted during the pandemic and how she and her colleagues melded:

> Everybody just came together. I think it was like, well, there's so much scary shit going on in the world outside, so yeah, feeling like I can contribute to something and make an impact immediately felt really good for people. I wish we could hold on to that energy of being able to respond quickly and be innovative.

Personally

Others made a point to mention the transitions they saw in themselves [***Self***]. Louna, who resisted leaving the office at the outset of the pandemic, said that she started to feel different:

> I noticed that I really enjoyed advising remotely and working remotely. I felt like the students, in a lot of ways, were more comfortable in their own spaces, which was really nice. I loved getting to see their room and talk about it. And so that was really fun for me.

Florinett said, “It feels weird to say, but I was at home with my family. We were safe, and we both had jobs. I knew we were very lucky, and so I just tried to also appreciate that for what it was.”

The advisors did not speak much about vaccinations, except where Ruth Mae noted that some students chose not to return to campus in Fall 2021 when they reopened because they would not get vaccinated:

> The big thing that came out of it was the return to campus, as students and faculty had to be vaccinated to be on campus or in person. So again, I can only speak anecdotally, but I did have some students who emailed and said, I won't be returning because I'm not going to get the vaccination.

Part 3 of 3 - The New Normal

With the pandemic threats reduced, the advisors reflected on their experiences and the current state of their unit. Their comments constructed this phase's situation, strategy, support, and self.

Continuing to Advise Virtually

There was an agreement among advisors about the ability to successfully advise students in a new virtual modality in the future [***Strategy***].

Shaylan, among others, felt that she could also build a relationship virtually with her exploratory advisees:

> If you had told me that I could be successful at this 10 years ago, I would have just laughed. But I am surprised, and I think I do a pretty good job with it. I had this forced upon me, like everyone else, and I did not see it as an opportunity initially.

Adelynn stressed the ability to share her screen when advising using Zoom. She offered this about advising students virtually:

> Zoom gives screen sharing, right? So that was a huge change that I think was for the better. You're not like flipping screens around. You're not having the students sit on top of you. Oh, you're considering computer science as your major? Let me pull up the major right here and now, and we can look at it together. Things like that were transformative, I think. Yes, just that screen share that we were not doing before.

Although email has been available for some time, another experienced advisor now uses it to add notes during the virtual advising session. “I do really like my practice of pulling up an email when I'm with a student and sending them the follow up links. I think that's really helpful for students. I know it's really helpful for me.” said Inga.

Adelynn continued, “I think this wider use of technology has become like becoming fluent in a new language. We all just more readily share information in a certain way that we weren't doing before.”

Leadership

As in the first two phases, higher education leadership continued to be a topic of conversation with the AAES [***Support***].

Holmes pointed out that at his university, “Leadership tried to commit to becoming a residential campus again and fulfilling that mission. They also recognize the benefit of flexibility with employees.” Winstone made this observation about his institution's leadership in what he described as an unprecedented level of change and uncertainty:

> I feel that we had a good level of leadership and thoughtful leadership. We were fortunate enough to have our first woman president during that time. Knowing some of the presidents before her, I felt that she was much more thoughtful about the human impact of this than I think some of her predecessors would have been.

Staffing

The changes in staff levels, among colleagues and at the senior level, were a topic of conversation, especially in the new normal **[*Situation*].**

After working with a consistent staff early in her advising tenure, Ruth Mae had this to say about the current climate: “I would say we've definitely had a lot more advisors leave our office. There have been a lot more advisors staying for maybe two years, three years, and then moving on to a new position again.”

Not all advisors experienced turnover issues in their units, but those who did made clear comments about the turnover and felt that much of it was connected with the pandemic. Eddington had this to say:

> Our office is undergoing some turnover at the moment that has been and is continuing. I was thinking about the opportunity costs of everything that was wrought by the pandemic. The transition of senior leaders and the future leaders of higher ed left. I think it's causing a lot of people in roles that are a stretch, and it makes things just overall more challenging. It is an after-effect of the pandemic.

Prelow was animated when he discussed the amount of turnover at his institution as staff were asked to return to the office after working remotely:

> It’s ridiculous. It wasn't as much during the pandemic because people like, oh, I need to keep my job and just we're all in it together. But when it got to the point where the institution started saying, All right, folks, I need you to come and work on campus again, there was a lot of pushback from staff. We lost a lot of people in advising. I know that was a national phenomenon of the Great Resignation. When they started making us come back, people were like, I'm not about that life anymore.

The Changes

Changes in operations have occurred across campus. The AAES highlighted processes, the institution's spotlight, and the overall environment [***Situation, Strategy***].

Adelynn cited examples of how operations at her HEI had been streamlined. She had just met with a student before our interview and spoke of the paperwork reduction.

“One, like huge innovation that came out of the COVID era. Fillable PDFs that we could just upload somewhere rather than having to do physical paperwork.”

Louna shared that the pandemic changed her perspective on the career and institution that she loved:

> Before the pandemic, I was like, I love higher ed, and I want to be in it, and I want to help people. Since the pandemic, I'm like, I want higher education to be free. I want it to look different. I want it to be based on a lot more experiential learning and less on studying old theories and texts and writing papers on them or taking tests and memorizing.

Darla noted a significant change at her HEI: “Our summer orientation is still virtual. The university has not gone back, and I don't think they will because they found it's really equitable.” Holmes pointed out that a good thing that came out of the pandemic was “that people became a lot more sensitive to those place-bound events that were sort of shut off from virtual students, and they tried to create more hybrid events where they would allow for engagement, both in person and online.”

Advising Approaches

The academic advisors discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their advising approaches. [***Self, Strategies, Situation***]

Louna had a change of perspective. She noted earlier that the pandemic had radicalized her:

> I was in my dream job. The job I have right now is literally like the one I had planned to retire in. And suddenly, I don't know if I feel good about working for a college. I don't know if colleges are the best way to educate

people or an equitable way to educate people or have kept up with current times.

The pandemic allowed Marcyn to assess her performance in her role and appreciate the value of in-person student interaction:

> I learned that I'm good at this role. I'm a good student supporter, and I do my job well, whether it's virtually or it's in person. I have a lot of resources and a lot of knowledge to help students. I think we all probably prefer the face-to-face interactions, and that we missed not having that. We're thankful that students are back. I still offer that we can meet via Zoom or we can meet in person.

Jaquita described the change in her: “I learned that I am skilled at being adaptable and able to pivot and that it is possible to create genuine human connections through a computer screen. I learned how to tailor my communication, my body language, to an online format.”

Holmes had this to offer about the changes that he saw in himself:

> I definitely have been really blessed. I've been able to take on a new institutional challenge or be involved with a new institutional project on a fairly regular basis. I was well prepared to manage during the pandemic. So, I think this, whatever stress or anxiety I might have had, I think was mitigated by just the desire to help and desire to, you know, be in good service to my institution and my unit during that time.

Students

When asked about any changes or trends in exploratory students, most AAES had an observation to share [***Situation***]. Florinett offered this information about the students she is currently advising:

> We've noticed a lot more homeschoolers. Parents just taking their kids out of the public schools or putting them in an online system since they figured, oh, online worked during COVID, let's just stay online. So, we've seen more of that, and just a lack of rigor that they probably had in some of those online classes. We have a remedial reading and a remedial math class, and we've noticed that those numbers have really gotten worse.

Louna said, "We've heard a lot from students who come out of high school during the pandemic say, I don't feel confident in my math skills. I didn't really learn math while I was in high school because of the pandemic."

Jaquita, an experienced AAES, described her perception of how the pandemic affected the current students she advises:

> I noticed that students wanted verification from a human about everything. Just a higher need for confirmation that, yes, this is the right answer. This is the next step, or this is the class to take, or this is the office to contact. Yeah, it seemed like there was a desire for more handholding among our students.

Another AAES with several years of experience, Shaylan, described what she saw in the current group of students.

> Yeah, their decision-making processes are just really in need of improvement. You know, we used to say the helicopter parents. Well, it's

different than that. I have students that say I need to call my dad in a meeting. And it's not just their needier; they're just so much more needier. I just don't think they have the problem-solving skills that are needed to really be successful in life. To persevere. Their feelings are hurt too easily.

Marcyn concurred with the other advisors. Her answer had another dimension, as students also looked for the benefits they were afforded during the pandemic.

Yes, yes. They seem less resilient. They seem less willing to persevere through that challenging time. We're seeing students that just they hit the wall, and it's like, Okay, I'm done. They just seem so uncomfortable or unable to get past that challenging point, or they're expecting something to be waived or a requirement to be loosened. But it's like, No, we're not going to waive things anymore. That was then.

Inga expressed being empathic and giving students grace whenever possible, but also shared this:

Now that we've lived through it, I'm like, well, damn it, I had young children at home and lived through the pandemic. So yes, grace up to a point for some of the things with students. It's like you have all this technology and all of this in your hands, and still you forgot about your advising appointment.

Eddington gave specific academic examples of what he sees and hears from newer students who were in high school during the pandemic:

So, higher rates of students starting in preparatory chemistry, pre-calculus, and repeating English 101. And I hear it all the time where students are

> just like, oh yeah, I took chemistry during COVID, and I just clicked through the slides while I was in bed. I don't remember it, so I really need to take it.

Eddington continued with the personal side of what he sees in his current students, and his comments covered the perceptions of other AAES:

> I think that most of our students were not appropriately taught how to balance their lives. And how could they have been? We never taught them to pivot back. Like, we just sort of expected them to turn everything back on and be like the people they were before. We aren't, so why do we expect them to be? I think that more focused work with students on how to build connections and relationships is necessary.

Chabar noted this: “I've noticed a greater hesitancy from students to be undeclared. There's a stigma about it. There may be several factors at play. The students that do it and meet with us love it and then they declare their major.”

Personally

The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide crisis. How has the pandemic period affected the AAES? [***Self, Situation***]. Whether it was how they worked with students or how they were personally affected, all the advisors felt they had grown in some way.

Louna said she stopped insisting students get a traditional college degree: “A lot more support for my students wherever they are, wherever they need to be. Less of ‘Surely you want to go to college and finish, and that's the best choice for you.’ That's probably been a big transition.”

Eddington described his scenario: “So, in some ways, it was a real growth opportunity for me. I feel that I grew my leadership abilities. I also feel like I grew my ability to just speak much more directly.”

Magic Wand

The advisors were asked what they would do with a magic wand if they had the authority, autonomy, and resources [***Situation, Strategy, Support, Self***].

The question was intended to prompt them to reflect on the pandemic and what we could have done better and to jog their memory of any important topics we had not discussed. Using a final question also gave the advisors the final word on what was important to them.

Their responses varied, but none asked for personal recognition. Chabar would use his magical powers to “have a central advising office that asks students questions to promote critical thinking about their major selection. We find that students, even though they have declared a major, haven't really put a lot of thought into it.” Lavarin wants more acknowledgment for his team to provide student support: “Highlight the benefits of our team, to be translated into them understanding the value of advising more, which I think would have helped us more today. Our turnover is high. The demand on our staff is a lot.”

Jaquita appreciated how her large university turned on a dime and would like to bring back that energy: “I’d really like to recapture our ability to pivot quickly and change policies, get everybody on board working towards a common goal.” Similarly, Shaylan asked for “Building relationships and maintaining empathy, flexibility, and open communication.” Conversely, Inga remembered an uncomfortable time for her that she would like to wipe away: We had to do some social hours. And I just remember that, at

that time, I did not enjoy those. So, I would take those away if I could. Now I can deal with them, but at the time, no." Several advisors spoke about their preferences for interacting with students. Darla asked that her magic wand be used for: "More appointments in person. I understand the flexibility for both advisors and students. I'm always going to allow that. I would like it to be the exception. I would like to really try to get them in person." Ruth Mae also wanted to be sure that the students were taken care of: "Did we check in with the students to see how they were doing? Everybody was going through it, right? Sure, you check in individually, but not on a large scale. In hindsight, that would have been helpful."

Eddington wants the wand to be used to "Help students rebuild some of the social connections and bridges that were lost." Another advisor, Holmes, also wanted help with students: "Put things under the microscope in student welfare and student learning and student success. The fact that we had some provocation to kind of consider those things in a new light has led to some pretty substantive things here." Prelow requested another student benefit with his magic wand: "Destigmatize exploring. More students would be better served because those who have just gone blindly into a major would have known they had a chance to go through a process to find out what their best fit is."

Wrapping up the magic wand requests, Marcyn would use hers to: "Remove the bad stuff from COVID but keep the positives of some of the things that we are doing supporting students. Help faculty and staff understand they're a different generation now and alert us to struggling students." Louna wants higher education to continue improving: "I just really want to see a more contemporary, modern system that serves people in our current world. So that would really make me feel like I was doing good and working

towards good things." Florinett wants more modernization after her institution reduced remote advising. What would she use her magic wand on? "It would be advising remotely again. It's something we know we're missing now. We scheduled some in the summer. I think we are all becoming more comfortable with it, and as a culture, we are embracing it. Remote advising again would be helpful." In Adelynn's case, she wanted to revisit the past: "I wish we just had more information and had a little bit more advanced warning that Friday in the office would be my last day for months and months. It was sort of like a secret. Take your computer home today because we may not be coming back." Wrapping up the magic wand requests is Winstone: "I wish our culture were one of curiosity and exploration. That also ties into my value of empathy. What does it feel like to be other people? What would this be like for other people? That's my magic wand wish."

Reflections from the Advisors

Here are a few comments from AAES that tie together some of the loose ends of our conversations.

Inga mentioned that it had been a long four and a half years since the pandemic began, but she had a positive take on the situation, "I think we've only improved. Yeah, I think the things that we learned from there have just kind of strengthened us. I think for the most part, you know, we took the good from that and rolled with it." Louna had a student-centric comment to add, "There was a sense we were all trying to kind of pull together and be flexible and supportive for students during the pandemic. And I think students are noting and feeling that, like, it's not there anymore."

Winstone spoke of the transformation that accompanied the pandemic period and the impact:

> As painful as the pandemic was for us, I think it is now hard to imagine not being pushed to do some of the things that we have been pushed to do, and I do feel a great sense of gratitude for that. You know, it transformed. There are new challenges with some of those transformations, but it transformed some of the ways that we deliver services and see our students, and I think that they were good transformations.

Adelynn, who had admitted to not coping well at the onset of the pandemic, is happy to be back at work. She pointed out that, “It feels like campus again. There's activity. One of the things I talked about when we were shut down was that they wanted there to be life in the building. Yeah, because that's what a college campus is.”

Summary

The advisors' responses, documented in the chapter, illustrated how they navigated the pandemic and its impact on their advising procedures. The advisors were subjected to the same concerns that many around the world had, but they persevered by making the adaptations to be safe while maintaining their positions as academic advisors of exploratory students. The final chapter in this dissertation follows. Chapter V summarizes the research study with a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

In this interpretive study, my research purpose was to understand how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact. The introduction to the study, presented in Chapter I, included foundational information to support the rationale for the research and posed four key questions to ground the research: (a) How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the delivery of academic advising to exploratory students? (b) What strategies to advise exploratory students were changed or created during the COVID-19 pandemic? (c) What support was instrumental to academic advisors of exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic? (d) How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect academic advisors of exploratory students? Chapter II was a review of the existing literature I found around the key topics in the research. Chapter III provides a detailed description of the methods employed in the study. Chapter IV presents the results of my findings, as reported by the academic advisors who participated in the study. In this chapter, I present my interpretations of the findings and offer recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Study

As the literature review showed, I found a few studies that examined this group of advisors. A comprehensive study of academic advisement for students exploring or changing majors is valuable because it provides administrators with insight into college students' preparedness, preferences, and patterns.

I was both an exploring student and an academic advisor. I was also completing my comprehensive examinations to become a doctoral candidate when the pandemic struck, and I was aware of the policy changes implemented by higher education institutions daily to mitigate the disruptions caused by the coronavirus. This study originated from a desire to understand how higher education institutions maintained ancillary services during the pandemic. More specifically, how did staff with student advising responsibilities handle their responsibilities during the pandemic? The fifteen participants provided clear and compelling narratives about their experiences before, during, and after the pandemic. For some, it was relatively smooth sailing with good outcomes. For others, the seas were choppy, but they arrived safely.

In response to RQ1, how did the COVID-19 pandemic affect the delivery of academic advisement to exploratory students? Reports from the advisors indicate that the necessary adjustments were made to reach students, including offering video conferencing through platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams and maintaining contact via phone calls and emails. Although few had used videoconferencing technology to advise before the pandemic, they were able to learn it relatively quickly. As the basic service with each application is free, the applications allow the advisors to stay connected to their students personally while working remotely. Many AAES commented that the availability of technology, internet access, and the students' situation, wherever they were residing, played a part in communication. Overall, the effects of COVID-19 did not have a negative operational impact on advising exploratory students.

Advisors who advised virtually identified several advantages of this modality, including sharing screens and notes. Every advisor interviewed felt they could continue

advising students from the onset of the pandemic by leveraging electronic methods, such as video conferencing and email. For one participant, the institution did not make a significant effort to transition to an online environment, as they preferred to remain a brick-and-mortar establishment and did not move to an online approach for advising; they currently do not offer virtual advising. However, they maintained communication with students through phone calls and emails until they could return to campus in person. The second research question (RQ2) is: What strategies to advise exploratory students were changed or created during the COVID-19 pandemic? Services for exploratory students have expanded regarding how they can reach an advisor. In addition to video-conferenced advising sessions during the school term, there were significant changes in how summer orientation was conducted for new students. In-person experiences transitioned to remote formats during the summer of 2020. At some institutions, summer orientation has remained virtual, or the in-person portion has been shortened and replaced with online modules to orient new students. Another modified strategy is the options available to students for advising appointments; they can now choose between in-person or virtual sessions for all advising units that provide virtual support. Some institutions now offer virtual advising during evening hours they did not previously provide; others implemented drop-in advising, allowing students to meet with an advisor without an appointment.

There were instances when new exploratory students admitted to their AAES that they did not learn the content in some key high school classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they often just “clicked through the slides” in their online classes. This has increased the need for academic advisors to develop strategies for remedial coursework,

particularly in math and science. When students require remedial coursework, it can delay their choice of a major and their matriculation to graduation. Some advisors have found that their current students, who completed high school during the pandemic, are more needy and sensitive than those in the past and require more guidance and support.

The third research question (RQ3) examined which support was instrumental for academic advisors of exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The AAES indicated that they were informed about the pandemic's effects on their university through emails, websites, and town halls, enabling them to perform their jobs more effectively when assisting students. Some expressed disappointment that their institution was not better prepared and informed at the outset of the pandemic. However, they felt that their administration did the best it could under the circumstances once the pandemic had begun. They also received support from their colleagues as they transitioned in-person classes to online formats, covered for coworkers who needed time off, and provided helpful assistance whenever a team member required it. Many felt that the camaraderie with their coworkers and colleagues was exceptional and wished for it to remain that way. Numerous supervisors and others within the group promoted team building and staying connected while working from home or sheltering in place. A primary concern was that many colleagues accepted early retirement offers if available or accelerated their retirement plans due to the pandemic. Advising staff positions have remained unfilled, sometimes increasing the advisor-advisee ratio.

The final research question (RQ4) examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic advisors themselves. This inquiry elicited numerous responses. Initially apprehensive about working remotely, some advisors discovered that they

enjoyed it and identified various benefits in how they could effectively advise. During the pandemic, advisors felt they had established a stronger voice on campus and gained confidence in their job performance. Many noted that they were more resilient and adaptable than they had previously thought. The opportunity to work remotely or in a hybrid setting transformed the advisors' perception of their jobs, making them feel more efficient. Some questioned whether they could build advising relationships virtually; although there was no consensus, some advisors expressed surprise at how comfortable they and the students felt during virtual advising. They believed they fostered relationships virtually, as it allowed them to gain more insight into the students' lives. Ultimately, they felt that both they and their units were stronger post-pandemic.

Discussion

The literature reviewed for this study included research on Schlossberg's Transition Model (STM). The model describes human adaptation to change (Schlossberg, 2011). I applied it as a theoretical framework in this investigation, as it focuses on:

- Any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles.
- How we cope in unfamiliar environments and unexpected situations.

Each of the four STM factors — situation, strategy, support, and self — was applied as a theme for the data. The application of this model contributes to understanding how all four factors impacted AAES. According to the literature reviewed, transition can be disabling as it disrupts relationships, responsibilities, and roles (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2002). The researchers reported that transition alters our experience and prompts us to formulate new assumptions about ourselves. The academic

advisors in this study concurred with that theory and expressed that they gained knowledge about themselves that they would not have otherwise received.

We often experience life disturbances that necessitate adaptation, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptation was required and successfully executed. Bobek et al. (2013), Savickas (2013), and Super and Knasel (1981) posit that transition is also contextual, significantly influenced by one's relationship with the environment in which it occurs and the individuals within that setting. Coping is the behavioral effort that advisors employ to manage, tolerate, or reduce external and internal daily work demands (Tummers et al., 2015). It can include behaviors like positive thinking and sharing problems with colleagues or others. Each advisor had a spirit of “can-do” or “will-do.” Not in a reckless manner, but in a 'let us figure this out' way. Whether relying on their family or pets, knowledge of previous challenges, organizational skills, spiritual faith, or a positive attitude, the advisors remained focused on getting through the pandemic and moving forward.

A transition happens over time. As Bobek and Robbins (2005) and Bobek et al. (2013) attested, the amount of time required to experience a transition varies based on several factors, including the nature of the transition and the connection to both the old and new situations. Such is the case in this study. Most participants reported holding on to both the old and the new, but they can feel and sense the transitions. The academic advisors are at different stages in the transition, which aligns with what researchers Anderson et al. (2012), Bobek et al. (2013), and Schlossberg (1981, 2011) reported, as they agreed that regardless of the amount of time spent, individuals may respond to similar transitions differently, depending on when in their life the transition occurs and

whether individuals interpret the transition as a positive or negative addition. A positive emergent growth process following the transition is expected, and that is what the AAES expressed. However, had I interviewed the advisors amid the pandemic, they might have been at a different stage. Depending on where they were during the transition, they might have expressed feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, or depression prior to the positive emergent growth.

Bobek and Robbins (2005), Yang and Gysbers (2007), and Super (1975, 1990) have described how the transition can result in psychological consequences if it involves the loss of daily structures, social support, or systematic routines. These consequences may include a lack of confidence, low self-worth, diminished self-esteem, isolation, loss of identity, weakened self-efficacy, or a sense of being devalued, accompanied by impaired coping skills. Although many advisors were in a hybrid work model, I did not hear that the loss of social support while not at work was an issue. One advisor particularly noted that, in hindsight, the amount of socialization in the office was an inefficient use of her time.

Researchers Aljets (2018) and Zarges et al. (2018) postulated that advisors provide valuable information as they identify recurring issues, including systemic barriers preventing students from graduation. My research found that advisors strategized to continue advising and offering the classes their exploratory advisees needed throughout the pandemic. They maintained continued engagement with students, as recommended in a study by Aiken-Wisniewski et al. (2015). They also kept pace with students' evolving needs, as recommended in research by Gordon and Steele (2015).

Advisors are also responsible for understanding and communicating academic policies, curriculum, graduation requirements, and strategies for student success, as noted by Champlin-Scharff (2010) and Fuller et al. (2022). During the pandemic, the only personal connection many exploratory students had to the university was through their academic advisor. According to the research in this study, advisors stayed informed about evolving academic and curriculum policies, housing restrictions, vaccination requirements, and other pandemic-related activities. They also advocated changes to the grading system for several semesters, including pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory options instead of grades, or extending the drop deadline so students could withdraw from a class. Furthermore, they continued to provide career guidance and opportunities for on-campus involvement when applicable, while monitoring their students' well-being.

Implications for Advisors

All students have the potential to become exploratory at some point in their college careers if they change majors. Advisors would be wise to (a) stay informed about the changing student and remedial opportunities at their school and in other environments, (b) focus on understanding how to reach all college students, including the newer generation, and (c) continue developing the skills necessary to help engage in career exploration and make informed decisions. Developing exploration and decision-making skills through academic advisement is beneficial for all students.

Maintaining a developmental approach with exploratory students is important. As Gordon and Steele (2015) explained, “The developmental approach views undecided students not as searching for an academic or career niche, but as individuals continually engaged in a series of developmental tasks that ultimately enable them to adapt and

change in a pluralistic world" (p. 68). How children have been educated since the pandemic may require advisors to provide more developmental guidance.

Implications for Future Research

Advisor turnover can be costly for institutions. The quality of advising that students receive may suffer, negatively impacting institutional goals, student retention, and persistence. This suggests that college campuses should focus on improving advisor working conditions by providing the necessary resources, including adequate staffing. Many institutions would not, or did not, consider hybrid or remote working conditions until the pandemic forced them to do so. How has the change in work schedules affected the campus environment? Is parking more readily available with alternate working hours? Implementing alternative working schedules can reduce traffic congestion around campuses. How does hybrid or remote working impact team building, staff development, and camaraderie? More than one advisor mentioned that new team members were added during the pandemic, and since they were not in the office together, they adjusted their training methods accordingly. The changes in training modes have remained, as they involve more advisors in training a new staff member. What can be discovered by conducting debriefing surveys at the staff level on what went well and what did not work well during the pandemic?

I developed an eight-week Leadership for Results (LFR) course for a large university, and two of its modules contained content relevant to this study. In the course, we emphasized the importance of leaders welcoming everyone to the table, meaning that differing viewpoints needed to be heard. The leaders recalled a time when a valuable suggestion came from a staff member who was considered different due to their political

views, hair color, sexual orientation, level of education, or some other aspect they perceived as distinct. Today, in 2025, when diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are being discussed as if they were not needed, I would like to encourage research on Academic Advisors of Color. How are they received when they interact with students from diverse backgrounds? Does meeting virtually help or hinder the relationship-building process? Additionally, how do Students of Color fare in exploratory programs? Are they excluded, ostracized, and marginalized within their groups for being unique, or are they accepted for their alternative approach to college? Is it more, less, or the same as their white counterparts?

In the interviews, whenever I heard that campuses were closed except for "essential workers," I contemplated who those essential workers were. In the LFR course, another discussion focused on treating all employees with respect, dignity, and importance. The classroom environment where we gathered would not have been conducive to learning if the trash had not been emptied the night before or if the restrooms had not been serviced regularly. The women and men who performed those tasks were essential to the university's purpose, just as the faculty were. The essential workers I mentioned in LFR and those who maintained the campus during the COVID-19 pandemic are the same: the custodial staff, the cafeteria personnel, and the security detail. At the nine universities where I have attended or worked, these essential workers were predominantly low-paid, minority individuals. What are their stories? How did they navigate the requirement of being on campus during the pandemic? How did it impact them? They are important voices. In Magolda's (2023) book, "The Lives of Campus Custodians," the results of his pre-COVID ethnographic study of custodians at higher

education institutions suggest that failing to recognize and benefit from their wisdom represents a squandered learning opportunity to the detriment of the entire campus community. What recommendations do these essential staff members have for handling future crises? We are being naïve if we do not think there will someday be another crisis.

Limitations

Most qualitative inquiries rely on information from a relatively small number of individuals, as in this study. In addition, the AAES that I interviewed persisted through COVID-19 and were all still serving in their roles. I did not get to interview academic advisors who had left during or after the pandemic. Consequently, there may be experiences that I could not capture from academic advisors who had left their role in exploratory studies and are the missing voices.

Personal Note

I thoroughly enjoyed researching this topic. While the COVID-19 pandemic was traumatic and heartbreaking, the stories of resilience on higher education campuses were truly inspiring. Not everything could be included in this study, but the content of the interviews and the off-topic conversations I had with the AAES will stay with me. While immersing myself in the interview data, I laughed, cheered, and sighed. I am incredibly thankful to the participants for their time, honesty, and dedication to their profession. Completing this dissertation was transformative for me, and I am grateful to have discovered a fulfilling subject that allowed me to embark on this journey.

Conclusion

The staggering statistics only partially capture the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus's toll continues to mount, with ripple effects across virtually every

domain of life. College campuses are once again bustling, but the effects regarding staffing dilemmas, the change in students, or adjusting to the new normal will not simply disappear. Administrators have responded to the crisis through various new policies and procedures, but questions remain about the pandemic's long-term impact (McClure et al., 2023, p. 2).

This study fills a research gap regarding academic advisors who specialize in advising exploratory students and contributes to ongoing studies about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education. Moreover, it illustrates the valuable connection that academic advisors have with the university and its students. The differences students exhibit compared to the past, resulting from their educational experiences during the 2020 pandemic, are likely to persist for several years. As the student base changes, an understanding of the exploratory student becomes pertinent. Academic advisors can gain a deeper understanding of the student base by the number of opportunities they have to interact with them. This study illustrates the contributions that academic advisors make to higher education institutions for exploratory students. That information is pertinent as colleges evaluate staffing, existing programs, and the need for new programs while recovering from and adapting to the unprecedented phenomenon of COVID-19 and the current 2025 dismantling of the Department of Education on a national level.

What this study uncovered was a change in students. Of the 15 participants, 13 acknowledged a shift in the students they serve as a direct result of the pandemic. Many of their current advisees in K-12 during the pandemic require additional remedial classes in composition, math, and science. Students admitted they did not grasp subjects merely by clicking through slides to read. The long-term effects of the pandemic on college

students' learning remain undetermined. However, now is the time to consider the focus of new research. For academic advising practitioners, scholars, administrators, and higher education leaders, innovative approaches are necessary to reach and support these students.

Much of the focus on exploration centers on first-year students, and it is time to advance the understanding of second and third-year students. All students have the potential to become exploratory at some point during their college experience or as part of their career development. Therefore, research may also focus on understanding the most effective ways to support all college students in exploring majors and careers. Academic advising practice should generally focus on assisting all students with major and career exploration and decision-making. Developing resources that enable students to explore majors and careers in culturally inclusive ways is also important. Threaded throughout the literature on undecided models, programs, and interventions is an awareness that the skills of exploration and decision-making are valuable to all students (Gordon & Steele, 2015; Grites, 1981; Spight, 2020). This skill development should be a priority and a fundamental learning outcome of academic advising. Exploration and decision-making skills are valuable to all students (Gordon, 1981; Gordon & Steele, 1992; Grites, 1981; Spight, 2020), and this skill development should be a priority and fundamental learning outcome of academic advising. I would like to see more universities embrace student exploration. I think exploring majors should be the norm.

The overall results of this study indicate that the academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the pandemic safely and effectively by working remotely, adapting to changes and ambiguity, and maintaining a focus on their responsibilities to student

development. I hope this study will shed light on academic advisors, an important group of college personnel, as they navigated an extraordinary event while providing services to a unique group of students.

One of the intents of an interpretive study, as described by Schlechty and Noblit (1982), is to seek understanding in one of three forms: (1) making the obvious obvious, (2) making the obvious dubious, or (3) making the hidden obvious. I did not know what I would find in this inquiry, but I feel comfortable with the conclusion. The academic advisors of exploratory students co-constructed with me how they navigated the pandemic while making both the obvious obvious and the hidden obvious.

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APPENDIX A:

Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

for the Protection of Human Research

Protocol Number: 04503-2024 **Responsible Researcher(s):** Sharon R. DeHaven

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jamie Workman **Dissertation Research Member:** Dr. Jamie Workman

Project Title: "How Do I Comfort Them on Zoom?" Academic Advisors of Exploratory Students and the COVID-19 pandemic

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *To maintain participant confidentiality pseudonym lists are to be kept in a separate, secure file from corresponding name lists.*
- *As part of the informed consent process, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming the participant's understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. The consent statement must be read aloud at the start of each interview session. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email list, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a* ***minimum of 3 years****. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☐ ***Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

APPENDIX B:

Email Invitation to Participate

Email Invitation

Greetings {Advisor's name},

I hope you are well. My name is Sharon DeHaven, and I am a doctoral candidate at Valdosta State University. My dissertation examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on exploratory academic advisors and their advising programs.

- As an academic advisor of exploratory students at {name of institution}, please share your experiences, perceptions, and program changes from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- We can meet for a 60-minute confidential interview and then schedule another follow-up interview. Our virtual meetings will be via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, whichever you prefer.

- Please select an initial interview time https://doodle.com/bp/dehaven-dissertation-interviews. Let me know if you prefer an evening or weekend time.

Thanks, {Advisor's name}. I am excited to meet you and add your voice to this research study. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Kindest Regards,

Sharon R. DeHaven, Ed. D candidate
Valdosta State University
Dewar College of Education and Human Services
Valdosta, GA 31698
srdehaven@valdosta.edu

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Sharon DeHaven at srdehaven@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX C:

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

- ○ Send a reminder email three days prior
- ○ Send a reminder email one day prior
- ○ Sign on to Zoom 15 minutes prior
- ○ Build rapport

Date: Pseudonym:
Time: Meeting ID:

- Greet the interviewee. Thank them for contributing to this research study. Let them know their consent is needed and read the IRB consent agreement.

- Confirm the interview length (1 hour). The advisor may stop the interview or take a break at any point. They may also choose not to answer any questions with no consequence. I intend to have a personable conversation. I will avoid using their name while recording to protect their anonymity. Confirm what term their institution uses - undecided, undeclared, exploratory, or something else.

- Start the recorder.

- The research purpose of this study is to understand how academic advisors of exploratory students navigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on their programs and procedures.

Opening Questions

a. How long have you worked in academic advising roles?
b. How many exploratory students do you advise?
c. What led you to become an academic advisor?
d. How do you describe your responsibilities as an academic advisor?

Interview Questions

1. What period do you consider to be in the COVID-19 pandemic, starting in March 2020? situation

2. What was your first academic advising experience related to the COVID-19 pandemic? situation

3. How did you stay informed about pandemic-related developments at your institution?	situation strategy support
4. How did you communicate with exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to pre-pandemic?	strategy
5. What tools or resources did you use to facilitate advising during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to pre-pandemic?	strategy support
6. What adaptations did you make to your advising approach during the COVID-19 pandemic?	self strategy
7. How did you collaborate with other departments to support exploratory students during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to pre-pandemic?	strategy support
8. What was your most difficult challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic?	self situation
9. What are the effects on the Exploratory Studies department from the COVID-19 pandemic?	situation support
10. How did you manage stress or anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic?	self support
11. How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact you as an academic advisor?	self strategy
12. What did you learn about yourself as an academic advisor from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences?	self strategy
13. What would you like to share that we have not discussed?	
14. What would you use a Magic Wand to accomplish (follow up)?	

APPENDIX D:

Informed Consent Statement

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled "How Do I Comfort Them on Zoom?" Academic Advisors of Exploratory Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic, which is being conducted by Sharon DeHaven, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of this study is to understand how academic advisors of exploratory navigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on their programs and procedures.

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us uncover vital information for academic advisors, administrators, students, faculty, and other higher education stakeholders. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 120 minutes over two meetings. The interview will be audio recorded and pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. Once the interview recording has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted from recording devices.

This research study and your participation will be confidential. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. If you choose to leave the study, audio-recorded conversations and any written information linking you to the research study will be destroyed. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate. Your participation in this interview serves as your voluntary consent and certification you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Sharon DeHaven at srdehaven@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) review under Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, protects the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.